

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in

**THE MYSTERY OF THE
GOLD FIGURINES**



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The Three Investigators receive a digital camera from a fellow detective friend running away from a pursuer. The camera contains a series of enigmatic photographs. When there is no contact from their friend, they suspect that she is captured. Taking on the case, they trace the photos to an elderly woman who tells them of the theft of a set of gold figurines. Clues suggest that the treasure is hidden on a desert island. Jupiter, Pete and Bob decide to solve the mystery and rescue their friend at the same time.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Gold Figurines

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Die drei ???: Der Fluch des Piraten

(The Three ???: The Pirate's Curse)

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1. On the Run

“Let’s go!” Pete urged. “Or Aunt Mathilda will think of some tiresome jobs for us!”

Bob grinned as he stepped out from trailer which served as the headquarters of The Three Investigators. He led the way through a dark tunnel and reached the back of a refrigerator that was standing in the middle of a huge pile of junk that hid their trailer. They called this the Cold Gate, and it was one of the secret entrances to their headquarters.

Bob pressed a mechanism, pushed the back wall of the refrigerator to the side and climbed into the inside of the appliance. He took a look through a peephole to check that there was nobody around outside. Then he opened the refrigerator door and went out into the salvage yard. Pete and Jupiter followed him.

Bob ran straight to his bike parked next to Red Gate Rover—another secret opening to get out from The Jones Salvage Yard to the street.

“Come on, Jupe,” Pete urged the leader of the detective trio.

“You go first,” Jupiter replied. “I have to go get my bike. It is parked in front of the yard office.”

Pete paused briefly. The fog had cleared, the sun was bouncing off the sky and the air tasted of the sea. What could be more beautiful in life than such a lush Californian dream weather day? Hanging out and nothing but hanging out was on the agenda.

The Three Investigators had arranged to meet a few friends at the beach. Everyone would bring something to eat or drink. Pete had strapped his boom box to the luggage rack, and that was the right thing to do to appreciate the start of the holidays—goodbye, annoying school... goodbye, you clever teachers... goodbye to getting up far too early! Oh, life could be so wonderful... Only Aunt Mathilda could stand in their way...

“Okay, you go quietly and don’t alert your aunt!” Pete muttered. “I’ll meet you outside...”

Jupiter ran off. Just as he was unlocking his bike, Aunt Mathilda called out from the office: “Jupe! Before you leave, could you please take the rubbish out to the street!”

The rubbish! The rubbish consisted of at least fifteen heavy plastic bags which were stinking in the sun next to the storeroom. One day more or less was certainly not going to matter.

“But Pete and Bob had already left,” shouted Jupe defensively.

“Darn!” Pete gasped as he heard Jupe and Aunt Mathilda. He then hurriedly pushed his bike towards Red Gate Rover and hit Bob’s calf with the front wheel of his bicycle.

“Watch it!” Bob turned around and looked down critically at himself. On his white trousers, there was a distinct black stripe. “Great, Pete! Really great! Look what you’ve done to my trousers!”

“So what! You can easily wash that out,” Pete said indifferently and suddenly jumped aside as if stung by a tarantula. “Watch it, Bob!” he yelled.

Bob had rolled the front tyre of his bike right over Pete’s brand-new bright shoes.

“Gee, Bob! These cost over seventy dollars!” Pete exclaimed.

“It’s your own fault with your show-off shoes,” said Bob, “and now just get out of the way! Or should we change our name to ‘The Three Rubbish Boys’?”

Back outside the yard office, Jupiter grumbled and was about to get on his bike when he heard footsteps. A girl was running across the street towards the main gate of the salvage yard. She was hardly older than The Three Investigators. While running, she kept turning around. Jupiter noticed that she was apparently being followed by a man. He was not very tall, but he was quick. In his left hand, he held a gun!

In shock, Jupiter was paralysed for a moment. The girl continued running, and suddenly it struck Jupiter. He recognized her! It was Althena, a fellow junior detective from San Francisco, whom The Three Investigators had met on one of their previous cases. They had not seen her since.

Now everything happened so quickly that Jupiter hardly noticed. Althena rushed up to the salvage yard's letter box and inconspicuously put something into it. Jupiter dropped his bike, looked over to Red Gate Rover and saw Pete and Bob. They had not noticed anything yet, so Jupe shouted and frantically waved to them to go over to the main gate. Then Jupe himself rushed to the gate.

It was still early in the morning. Uncle Titus had unlocked the gate but had not opened it for business. Just when Jupe swung open the gate and stepped out, the man crashed into him. Jupe lost his balance and fell onto the hard pavement.

The First Investigator threw his head around and saw the man threatening him with the gun. In a distance, he saw Althena running away. Jupe wanted to help her but the pursuer was standing beside him. Jupe was just getting up when the man gave him a hard elbow blow and knocked him down again. A violent pain went through his chest. He lost his breath and writhed on the ground.

By that time, Pete reached outside the gate. He took a step forward and tripped the man. The pursuer stumbled and slammed heavily onto the sidewalk. His gun slithered along the pavement. The man cursed, pulled himself up and grabbed his gun.

“Stay out of this, you rascals!” he shouted and looked directly at Pete for a brief moment. Then he turned around and ran on. Pete was terrified.

“That girl!” cried Jupiter. “It’s Althena! We must help her!”

“Althena?” Pete gasped.

“Yes,” Jupe exclaimed. “Go help her. Go after that man!”

At least Althena had her lead again thanks to their interference. Pete took a breath and ran down the street. By that time, Bob came out and attended to Jupiter.

The man had disappeared around the corner. Pete raced along the wooden fence that bordered the salvage yard, turned a few metres into the side street and just saw the man disappear through a gate at some distance away.

As Pete knew, the other side of the property led to the highway. Spontaneously he decided to take a shortcut, crossed a camp site and a few seconds later, reached the highway. There was a lot of traffic. The bus to Malibu had just left the bus stop and chugged leisurely towards Pete. The man appeared behind the bus. He had slowed down, then stopped completely and made a throwing arm movement.

Pete rejoiced. Had Althena managed to escape? The bus approached with more speed, but still slow enough for Pete to see Althena waving to him from the front window.

“Yes!” cried Pete, even though she couldn’t hear him behind the closed window. Althena had really made it! Then he looked down the highway again. The man had disappeared. Pete waited a while longer, but the pursuer had apparently given up and went away.

Satisfied, Pete jogged back to the salvage yard. Meanwhile, Jupiter was leaning against the wooden fence and holding his chest. He had told Bob what had happened.

“You okay, Jupe?” cried Pete when he got close enough.

Jupiter looked up and nodded. "What about you?"

"Althena managed to escape," Pete said. "She caught the bus to Malibu, and the guy went away!"

"Lucky," said Jupe with relief. "I didn't like that guy at all. Where is he anyway?"

"Vanished without a trace." Pete pondered for a moment. "Maybe he parked his car nearby. We should search the area. What do you think, Jupe?"

The First Investigator moaned. "I have to sort myself out first. My ribs hurt! I hope they're not broken." He massaged his chest briefly. Then he stood up and staggered over to the letter box and took out a smooth, elongated object. It was a silver-coloured digital camera. He put it safely in his back pocket and then said: "Okay... I think I can do it."

Very soon, The Three Investigators set off. To be on the safe side, they stayed together. They cycled around all the roads in the surrounding area, but they did not see the man who was chasing Althena.

After half an hour, they returned to the salvage yard and thoughtfully pushed their bikes inside.

"I'd like to know what that was all about," said Pete. "Wouldn't you agree? The guy kind of looked like Ray Liotta."

"Ray Liotta the actor?" Bob asked.

"It's not him, of course, but he had equally dangerous looking cat eyes."

"What about the rubbish?"

The Three Investigators flinched. Aunt Mathilda stuck her head out the office window. Her face looked determined. But then she spotted Jupiter's clothes, dirty from the fall. Immediately the reproachfulness in her voice vanished and made way for deep concern.

"Jupe! What has happened? Oh, my Jupe! Come here!"

Jupiter gritted his teeth as best as he could. "It's alright, Aunt Mathilda, it's alright! It was nothing bad. I just fell down from my bike."

It didn't help. Mathilda Jones waved her nephew energetically into the office. She put Jupiter in the best chair and opened the fridge to get her nephew something cold to drink. He accepted it with thanks and leaned back. Then his hand went into the bulging back pocket and pulled out the digital camera.

Jupiter Jones immediately forgot all his pain. There was only one explanation—Althena was up to something, which was why that man was chasing her, and the answers should be in the camera!

2. The Enigmatic Photos

It took Jupiter a few minutes to convince his aunt that nothing serious had happened to him. Pete and Bob had come in the meantime and were also supplied with drinks by Aunt Mathilda. The two greedily drank up their glasses. The much longed-for party on the beach had not been an issue since the incident. The more pressing issue was that The Three Investigators could do nothing to help Althena. They had to wait until she would contact them.

Jupiter Jones let out a deep groan. "I'd like to lie down for a while," he said in a remarkably dull voice that Pete and Bob frowned at him. Actually he was quite well again.

"I think resting is an excellent idea, Jupe," explained Aunt Mathilda, visibly amazed at how sensible her nephew could be from time to time. "Go rest in your bedroom."

"It won't be long before I'll be in top shape again," Jupiter said. "Pete, Bob! Are you coming with me?" He winked at them.

"Uh, of course!" cried Bob.

The Joneses live in a two-storey house just outside the salvage yard. A short distance from the yard office was a gate that separated the house and the yard. Once the three of them got into house, they rushed into Jupe's room, which was on the first floor.

The chaos in the salvage yard was only surpassed by the chaos in Jupiter's room. A stack of magazines, papers, CDs and books covered the desk, and in between lay dried-up cake crumbs. The bed was not made, and next to the pillow was a ball of clothes. It was slightly musty. It must have somehow remained hidden from Jupe that a window could also be opened. Aunt Mathilda had refused to enter his room for a long time—a situation that drove him to even more disorder.

Instead of resting as promised, the First Investigator sat down swinging on the edge of his bed and pulled out the digital camera. "So Althena passed her camera to us," he said.

"She's probably into a new case," Bob said.

Jupiter nodded and tried to turn on the camera. "And the photos on the camera will perhaps give us some clues as to what it is all about."

"Or the man was after the camera, and she gave it to us, so to speak, for safekeeping," speculated Bob. "In any case, it certainly contains a secret. Come on, give me the camera, it's not like I can watch you fiddling around with it."

Jupiter shook his head vigorously.

"Nothing doing. It's a matter for the leader," said Pete grinning. "But what is Althena doing here on foreign soil? Los Angeles is our territory!"

Althena was of course an alias. Together with her friend Corona, she ran a detective agency known as Callidae in San Francisco. Like The Three Investigators, they had solved many mysteries. They had met in a previous case at the 'Cave of Torture' and since then, they told each other their adventures from time to time by e-mail. But Althena had never told them that she was coming to Los Angeles.

In the meantime, Jupiter had managed to switch the camera to playback mode and the display lit up. Bob and Pete huddled by his side to take a look at the photos.

"Let's go!" Jupiter carefully clicked the photos one after the other from the start.

After the seventeenth click, they had come to the end, and the first image reappeared—a photo of Althena's face, which she must have taken herself with her arm stretched out.

The Three Investigators looked disappointed. Some of the photos were puzzling. At first glance, they hadn't noticed anything that suggested a clue to the incident—no treasure, no money case, no masked man, no secret signs and no creepy monster. Instead, there were a few photos from Los Angeles, a photo of Althena together with a girl, an unknown older woman, a poster featuring an old pirate ship, and three photos of a letter.

Jupiter got up, turned on his computer, connected the camera, and downloaded the photos from the chip. There was clearly more to see on the screen than on the small display of the digital camera.

Jupiter looked at the first of the three photos with a letter. It was a hand-written letter that was not dated. The words were clear enough to be read. It said:

Dear Sarah,

I am doing well given the circumstances.

Just to let you know that sometime ago, I met up with Bianca, and together we visited Celeste Landismann. Both of them sent their regards to you. They also talked about their dreams of building a house, planting trees, finding their happiness and living their best lives—just like what Carlos and Ronaldo prepared them for. Perhaps you could take an example from them. Unfortunately, I will not be able to do that. So whatever you choose to do, I can only wish you the best.

*Love you,
Franco*

“What?” said Pete. “Planting trees and finding happiness? This is no mystery! It's nothing!”

Jupiter enlarged the photo and went all the way to the bottom of the paper. “Hey! See that? California State Prison... and the address.”

“California State Prison?” Bob raised his head in interest.

Jupiter nodded. “Yes, the letter was written on the prison's letterhead—perhaps by an inmate.”

Then he clicked on the second photo. It was identical to the first, obviously taken as a back-up.

Finally, he clicked on the third photo. It showed a somewhat different letter lying on an old brown wooden table with a palm tree carved on it. At the upper edge of the photo was part of an ashtray. When Jupe enlarged the photo, they discovered that the letter contained the same text as the earlier one. It was also hand-written, only that the writing was different.

“It would seem that the earlier letter with the prison letterhead is the original and this one is a copy,” Jupiter said, convinced.

“That doesn't make the text any more exciting,” Pete remarked.

“Wait! How do you explain this?” Jupiter pointed to a different section of the photo. Next to the table with the letter hung a small mirror. Jupiter enlarged the photo but the quality became worse. However, it was clear enough—in the mirror they saw a gun held by a hand in a black glove.

“What does this mean?” Pete asked.

“I don't know yet,” Jupiter said. “But I can tell that we are in the middle of a new case!”

“Wait a minute, since we are not going to the beach, we should at least let the others know!” Pete pulled out his mobile phone and pressed a number. After a short time, the connection was established. “Hi, Jeffrey... We are not coming. We have to help with something here... No, we can’t at all... Yeah, okay. Bye.” Thoughtfully, he put the phone away.

Bob pointed at the screen. “This photo is interesting,” he said. “The pirate ship looks very strange.”

“So what?” Pete murmured defiantly. “I see a perfectly ordinary pirate ship washed up on a rock!”

“Really?” Bob contradicted. “The state of preservation is far too good! Such models of ships actually existed a hundred or two hundred years ago!”

“Two hundred,” said Jupiter. “At least...”

“What’s the name of this ship? It’s got a name plate on it.” Bob took the mouse and enlarged the photo. The writing was blurred, but still legible—‘Black Rose’.

“*Black Rose... Black Rose...* somehow it sounds familiar,” said Bob. “Jupe, may I go on the Internet?”

Wordlessly, the First Investigator gave up the seat. Bob was responsible for records and research for The Three Investigators.

Bob got to a search engine. “Ever since the Internet came into existence, fact-finding has not been any fun at all,” he murmured. “It has lost its distinctiveness. Any fool can do it now.”

“If you mean people like me, thank you,” Pete remarked.

Bob did not react and let his gaze wander across the screen. “Wait... here, that’s it!” Triumphant, he launched a new page on the browser. “I knew it! I knew it!”

3. The Pirate's Curse

“What did you know?” Pete asked. He moved closer to Bob to look at the screen.

“—That *Black Rose* is a pirate ship from a movie!” Bob exclaimed. “The movie is called *The Pirate’s Curse!* I saw it on TV when I was a little kid. The picture from Althena’s camera must be a scene from the movie. It is not an original ship! That is why it is in such good condition.”

“A model then,” Pete said. “But why is Althena taking photos of an old movie scene?”

Bob kept clicking, and an entry for the movie appeared. “The movie was not a great success,” he read. “It only ran a few weeks... ah... that’s strange. Listen to this... the movie’s completion took longer than planned because the director suddenly got lost!”

“Excuse me?” Jupiter came closer and read along. “Dennis Browne, the director, disappeared after the shooting on San Clemente Island and was never seen again. There was wild speculation that he might have been killed. He might have drowned because he couldn’t swim. In any case, for a while, the investigation into him kept the media more busy than the movie itself. That sounds very remarkable indeed!”

“When did all this happen?” Pete asked.

“About thirty years ago,” Bob said. “Oh, that’s interesting. It says here that *The Pirate’s Curse* is soon to be re-made. A certain Elvira Zuckerman is taking care of that. She is the producer. Here is a short interview...

“She says that after the disappearance of the original director, his work was patched up rather sloppily and the pirate story has much more to offer. In a few months’ time, the shooting of the new movie will begin, and at the moment, they are still looking for suitable locations.”

He read more down the page for a while, and when he found no further clues, he copied the text and saved it in a file. Then he raised his head. “A letter from a prison, a fake pirate wreck and a missing director... looks like Althena has come across a strange story! But where is the connection?”

Bob got up and Jupiter sat down in front of the screen again. The First Investigator looked again through all the shots Althena had taken. The only conspicuous thing was that the photographs of the pirate ship and the letter on the notepaper were the last photos Althena had taken.

Curiously, he clicked on the dates and times embedded in the photos and saw they were a few days old. He made a list:

Older photos:

Photo 1: Althena’s face

Photo 2: Althena’s feet (presumably)

Photo 3: Once again Althena’s feet

Photo 4: Althena with unknown girl

Photo 5: The unknown girl

Three days ago (Wednesday):

Photo 6: The bus station of LA

Photo 7: Photo from the LA bus

Photo 8: Ditto

Photo 9: Ditto

Photo 10: An elderly woman holding a photo of a man in her hand

Photo 11: A photo of the photo of the man

Photo 12: The elderly woman with playing cards

Photo 13: The elderly woman on a terrace

Photo 14: A letter

Photo 15: The same letter (probably a back-up)

Two days ago (Thursday):

Photo 16: Poster with a pirate ship

Photo 17: Letter; hand with gun in the mirror

Jupiter looked at the photos again, but found no further clues for the time being. He shut down his computer and sat down with Bob, who had meanwhile taken a seat on the bed. For a while, the two of them thought in silence, while Pete stepped more and more restlessly from one foot to the other. "I don't feel comfortable with this," it finally burst out of him.

Bob grinned. "Anything else would have surprised me."

"No, it's not what you think!" Pete searched for words. "I know—Pete the coward... But what if... what if... what if the whole thing is something like a trap? After all, this has already happened to us from time to time! Maybe we're just meant to be lured to somewhere."

"You mean the incident was faked? Althena is not in danger in reality, and she tricked us into some kind of trap?" Jupiter asked.

"We don't know her and Corona that well," Pete said. "And it's been a while since we've seen them."

Bob shook his head. "I don't believe that she will do that, although I can think of a nice story about it from the book of fables Lesley lent me..."

"A simple-minded chicken had ventured too far away. That's when it met a fox, whose mouth watered at the sight of the juicy chicken. But the fox was a fox after all, and knew where there was a chicken, there would be many more nearby."

"'Chicken,' he said cunningly, 'I had seen that the farmer had just poured a sack of grains at the farm!'

"'Grains?' the chicken said and hurried back. The fox crept after it. When it reached the gate to the farm, the farmer stood behind it and beat the fox up." Bob grinned.

"So what?" Pete asked. "What is the moral of the story?"

"Not every trick leads to success," said Jupiter.

"Or take what you can get," Pete said. "But maybe this incident is really a trick. Maybe Althena had her reasons. It doesn't matter anyway. As I know you, we have to find out the connection one way or another."

Jupiter nodded. "Althena has managed to escape, but she needs help. Nevertheless, we should always be wary that things could turn out differently. But I would be reluctant to inform the police. What should we tell them?"

"That a man threatened us with a gun!" Pete replied. "And he looked like Ray Liotta."

Jupiter shook his head. "The police will shrug their shoulders and retain the camera. And besides, Althena has escaped her pursuer. We must wait until she contacts us."

“Why hasn’t she done that already?” Bob asked.

“Not if she has to hide!” Pete suggested.

“In any case, there is no time to lose,” said Bob. “How do we start?”

Jupiter closed his eyes and thought. “We have to find out more about Dennis Browne, the director. And about Franco, that letter writer from prison. We should also see the old movie... and not forget the other photos on the camera. I’m sure they contain clues that we have overlooked or that we have not yet been able to figure out.”

“Maybe Corona knows what’s going on,” Bob added. “After all, she is Althena’s friend. I’ll just give her a call.”

The moment he got up from bed, the loud voice of Aunt Mathilda resounded through the staircase. “Jupeeeter! Would you like another cold compress?”

“In any case, we should think about a quick change of location,” Jupiter promptly said. “I suggest we retreat to Headquarters!”

The Three Investigators left Jupiter’s room. On their way out, they stopped by the kitchen to reassure Aunt Mathilda with a few words.

They went back into the salvage yard, crossed over to the Cold Gate and entered Headquarters. Straight away, Bob grabbed the telephone and sat down on one of the chairs at the table.

While Bob tried to reach Corona, Pete searched the Internet for a DVD of the pirate movie. Jupiter sat down, fiddled with the camera again and looked at the photos with a frown for the umpteenth time, as if this would make him smarter.

But Bob was unlucky. Corona did not answer the phone. He did not have her mobile phone number, so he would probably have to send her an e-mail.

Pete was also unsuccessful as *The Pirate’s Curse* was no longer available in the market and could only be bought second-hand. Disappointed, Pete left the computer and went to get a Coke.

When he had sat down with the other two, Jupiter put the camera aside. It was written on his face that he had noticed something.

“I looked at the three photos of the letter again,” said the First Investigator. “I am sure that the version that was photographed twice is the original letter. The last photo on Althena’s camera should be a hand-written copy. I deduced this from the annotations in the margin, which were written in the same handwriting.

“The original is probably from the elderly woman. There are barely ten minutes between taking the photo of the woman and that of the original letter. These were taken on Wednesday. However, the hand-written copy of the letter was taken on Thursday morning, but unfortunately the photo gives no clue where.”

“We don’t know who the elderly woman is,” Pete objected.

“We do not know her name. But I have a hunch where we can find her!” Jupiter took the camera, clicked the photo on the display and zoomed in on a specific spot.

“It’s a plate,” said Pete. “So what?”

“So what? Say, can you stop this constant ‘so what’,” grumbled Jupiter. “Where did you get this habit from anyway?”

“Kelly put it in his ear,” Bob said, grinning. “She always says it when he gets upset with her. And that’s been happening a lot lately!”

Just in time, he took cover to avoid Pete’s projectile—a tattered old notebook. It hit Jupiter on the head instead. Annoyed, he threw the notebook on the floor.

“Hey! Can you both stop this nonsense! We are working on a new case!”

“Aye aye, Captain!” Pete and Bob grinned at each other and moved their chairs closer to Jupiter.

“So what have you discovered, Chief?” Bob asked.

Jupiter cleared his throat. “The plate is from a retirement home. I recognize it from the emblem here. Uncle Titus passed by there on business every now and then. It’s called Sundown Village and is not far from here in the direction of Los Angeles. I would suggest we go there and talk to this mystery elderly woman!”

4. The Elderly Woman

Sundown Village was situated in the hills, somewhat away from the residential areas and consisted of several small housing units in which elderly people could spend their old age without having to go straight to a retirement home. There were centrally located shopping facilities, a medical service and an office, which The Three Investigators headed for first.

They marched right up to a young woman sitting behind the counter. "Yes?" she asked.

Jupiter pulled out the camera and walked up to her. "We'd like to visit this lady."

The employee looked briefly at the display. "You don't know her name?" she asked sceptically.

Jupiter had expected this reaction and had come up with something. "A friend who visited this woman left this camera with us. Unfortunately we don't have the girl's address, but we would like to find her and give her back her camera. This lady can help us with that." Jupiter put on the most honest expression he could and looked deep into the eyes of the employee with the trusting how-do-I-convince-Aunt-Mathilda look.

"Ah, yes." The woman picked up the phone and dialled a number. "Mrs Livingston, there are three boys here for you who claim you had a visit from a girl... Yes, the girl left her camera with them and they want to return it... Yes, all right!"

"You can go to her," she then said and put a map on the table. She marked a path with a pen. "Here, unit number 33." She changed into a smile.

Jupiter thanked her and The Three Investigators left the office.

A short time later, they were sitting on the terrace of Sarah Livingston. The old lady had prepared a few glasses of water for them and beamed all over their faces. "I have so few visitors! And now within such a short time, I have more visitors!"

"So you're very lonely here..." Bob picked up the thread.

"Oh, yes. My brother died many years ago. And I haven't seen much of my husband except a little money." She giggled. "Well, that's something, after all... but what are you here about?"

Jupiter looked at Bob approvingly and said: "We know that Althena paid you a visit. What did she want from you?"

"Althena? Yes, that's what she called herself. Well, it was the other way round... I wanted something from her. But why should I tell you this? I know nothing about you!"

"We are also detectives—counterparts of Althena, so to speak." Jupiter took out one of the business cards and handed it to Mrs Livingston.

The old lady looked at the card. It said:



Suddenly she looked up and her eyes lit up. "The Three Investigators, yes, I have heard about you! You met Althena at a spooky castle."

"That's right!" said Jupiter in surprise.

"Althena has told me about you. She told me that you are good detectives. I asked her to take on my case because she once took care of the problems of a friend in San Francisco very successfully."

"But now Althena is in trouble! Ma'am, she has not just lost her camera!" Jupiter said as he took out the camera and showed it to Mrs Livingston. "She left this camera with us without any further information. It was clear to us that she wanted us to help her but for that, we would need to know what case she was working on."

With a concentrated face, Mrs Livingston pondered for a while. The Three Investigators remained silent. Suddenly the old lady looked up. "She had a mystery to solve," she said. "An old mystery. I wonder why she's in trouble over it. It's been a long time."

"Perhaps there are people who are still interested in this mystery today," Jupiter said.

Mrs Livingston pondered again. "It could be connected with the movie," she said thoughtfully.

"*The Pirate's Curse?*" Bob interjected.

Mrs Livingston looked at him in astonishment. "No, it's a movie about my brother's life! That director kept asking about my brother... but I never trusted him!"

"Which director are you talking about?" Bob asked.

"Dennis Browne! That was his name!" She smiled. "And—"

"—*The Pirate's Curse* was directed by Dennis Browne," cried Bob.

"I know," Mrs Livingston said. "*The Pirate's Curse* was shot when he abandoned the movie project about my brother. He was with me—this Dennis Browne."

Jupiter sat upright. "When did he visit you? As far as we know, Mr Browne is dead, or at least lost..."

Mrs Livingston thought about it for a while and then said: "It was about thirty years ago..."

Jupiter leaned back. "What did he want from you back then?"

"He asked me about my brother," she replied.

"What I'd also like to know is the letter you showed Althena," Jupe continued.

Mrs Livingston smiled, got up and walked into the interior of the house.

"What is she doing?" Pete asked.

"She's getting the letter," said Jupiter. "What else?"

After two minutes, Mrs Livingston came back. In her hand she held a yellowed paper. "This is why I called Althena to me!"

5. The Treasure

The Three Investigators bent over the letter. It was the one with the prison letterhead that Althena had photographed twice.

Mrs Livingston cleared her throat. "I asked Althena to solve the mystery contained in this letter."

"There is a mystery hidden in this simple letter?" Pete interjected incredulously.

Jupiter looked at him sharply. Then he turned to the lady. "I suppose your brother was in prison at the time?"

"Yes, as you can tell from the letterhead," Mrs Livingston confirmed. "He was at the California State Prison."

"Presumably Franco wanted to tell you something in the letter that the prison management or even the police should not be aware of."

Mrs Livingston made a sound of astonishment. "You're as smart as Althena! I didn't have to tell you any more than that!"

"Well, unfortunately it's not that simple," Jupiter said. "Can you tell us more about your brother?"

The lady nodded. "All right. Franco was actually a good guy. He even studied botany, especially the life of plants, but somehow he couldn't find a job and got on the wrong track, and so he was in prison from time to time for minor offences. In the end, he allegedly stole a collection of valuable gold figurines from a museum in San Francisco. A billionaire had them made for his son's birthday. They were pairs of animals, meant for an ark. They were made of high-quality gold and were decorated with precious gemstones."

"How many pieces were there?" asked Jupiter.

"Exactly twenty-three pairs—and that corresponds to the age of the billionaire's son. In any case, Franco wanted to visit me, and then go into hiding. When he left San Francisco by car, he was said to be carrying the treasure with him. When he arrived in Los Angeles three days later and got arrested, the gold figurines were not with him. No one knows where Franco was during those three days. The police searched everywhere for the figurines, including my place. They are worth millions of dollars."

"When the police were gone, the insurance agents came to me, and they also turned everything upside down. But the figurines remained missing. The police then intercepted Franco's letter to me and wanted to know from me what it meant. But I couldn't tell them, not for the life of me. I had no idea! None of this meant anything to me."

"Who are the people he named in the letter?" Jupe asked.

"I don't know anybody by the name of Bianca or Celeste Landismann. The only 'Bianca' that I recall is that Franco once had a friend who owned a yacht called 'Bianca', but that can't have anything to do with this. The yacht is in Europe. The police checked it anyway."

"What about the other two names, Carlos and Ronaldo," Bob asked. "Could they be related to Bianca and Celeste? Their spouses, perhaps?"

"I don't know anybody by those names either," Mrs Livingston replied. "Perhaps they were my brother's friends, but no, I don't recall these names."

"Why didn't you ask your brother about these names on a later occasion?" Bob asked.

"I would have, but I didn't have a chance. He died shortly afterwards in a prison riot."

"We're sorry about that," Bob said.

Mrs Livingston looked lost in thought. "It's been a long time."

"And you also believe that Franco wanted to tell you the hiding place of the gold figurines?" asked Bob.

"Yes, I can well imagine that. He liked me very much, and knew that I was in financial trouble at that time. After all the fuss, I let everything rest for years. But now, as I am getting older, I want to clear up the story and be at peace with everything the soonest possible. The figurines should go back to where they belong. However, the police have found nothing. The insurance investigators have failed as well..."

"... And you thought of fresh young investigators!" Pete laughed. "We like that, don't we, fellas, even if they are our competitors. But the Callidæ Detective Agency in San Francisco has two people—Althena and Corona. Where is the other detective?"

"Corona is no longer working with Althena. The two have quarrelled and... went separate ways."

"Hmm..." That is why The Three Investigators had not heard from them for quite a while. For a brief moment, the three of them remained silent. They all thought the same thing. Hopefully they would never part... Never.

Then Jupiter asked: "Have you now brought us up-to-date to what Althena knows?"

"Yes," Mrs Livingston said.

"You earlier mentioned the director Dennis Browne," Jupiter continued on. "What more can you tell us about him?"

"That man wanted to know all kinds of things and asked me a lot of questions. He kept coming back, wouldn't stop, and then one day—"

"—You told him about the letter," Jupiter interrupted her.

Mrs Livingston nodded. "I showed it to him in the hope that he might have a clue for me, and Dennis copied down the letter."

"So that's where the copy came from!" Pete slipped it out.

Mrs Livingston continued undeterred. "I wish that Dennis had not found the treasure. How could he possibly solve the mystery? But perhaps he did, and he has disappeared from his life here... Perhaps he squandered the money somewhere in South America."

"So you mean Browne's not dead at all?" Pete asked.

"I don't know."

"We will make every effort to give you an answer to this," said Jupiter. "And we will take care of Althena."

"The latter is most important to me," said Mrs Livingston. "After all, I gave her the job and therefore I have a certain responsibility. It was nice of you to visit me, and I wish you good luck. But now I would like to lie down for a while. This conversation has been very tiring for me."

The Three Investigators stood up and said goodbye.

"We'll get back to you," Bob promised.

"Please do!" the lady said.

By the time The Three Investigators had left the Sundown Village residential complex and were driving along one of the large boulevards towards Rocky Beach in Bob's Beetle, the sun had long since reached its highest point. By now, their friends at the beach party were

probably lying lazily on the hot sand with their picnic-stuffed bellies caressed by the refreshing sea breeze.

Pete repressed the thoughts of what he had missed, and then turned to Jupiter. "What Mrs Livingston told us sounds really very strange. But how shall we go on?"

Jupiter pinched his lower lip and said: "After Althena photographed the letter at Mrs Livingston's, she took two more shots. That was the movie poster and a copy of the letter. Two days later, that is today, she turns up outside the salvage yard and is followed. We don't know what happened after that. Our next step is to find out more about Dennis Browne."

"There could be some sort of records," said Bob, who was at the wheel. "I'll check on it."

"I have an idea," said Pete.

"So what?" Jupiter asked with a grin.

"Bob told us that *The Pirate's Curse* is going to be remade... by a producer named Zuckerman," Pete continued unperturbed. "She probably would have secured Dennis Browne's documents and movie archives in advance. This is exactly what Althena must have suspected!"

Jupiter nodded appreciatively. "Pete, for today, you can think about surfing again! You have made your contribution. Fellas, off to Elvira Zuckerman!"

6. A Tempting Offer

To find out the address of Elvira Zuckerman's office, The Three Investigators only had to make one phone call. That was to Pete's father, who worked in special effects in the movie industry. When Pete's father got back to them with the address, they were pleasantly surprised. Elvira Zuckerman's office was in the premises of one of Hollywood's better known movie companies.

They set off immediately. Closer to their destination, Bob drove past high stucco walls that extended for a full two blocks. A sign on top said: 'World Studios'. The Three Investigators were very familiar with this place—as they had been here many times.

Bob stopped his car at the tall iron gate where a man in uniform sat in a small cubbyhole beside it. Pete's father had earlier set up an appointment for them with Miss Zuckerman so there weren't any problems with the security.

Bob drove on and turned down a narrow street bordered on both sides by green lawns and palm trees, with dozens of small, attractive buildings set close together among them. Further on were the arched roofs of the big studios where movies and television shows were made.

As was customary in many studios, producers had a house or cottage of their own where they could work without being disturbed. Bob pulled up beside a building where there was a neatly painted sign that said: 'Elvira Zuckerman'.

They went up a few steps and then through a glass door. There was nobody in the reception area, so Jupiter walked towards a large door with a brass plate that displayed the producer's name and he knocked.

"Come in!"

Curious, The Three Investigators entered the office. Elvira Zuckerman was enthroned behind a huge desk. She stood up to greet them.

"Hello Miss Zuckerman! Mr Crenshaw set up an appointment for us to meet you," said Jupiter. "This is Bob Andrews, this is Mr Crenshaw's son Pete, and I'm Jupiter Jones."

While Miss Zuckerman came to them, Jupiter winked at Pete and Bob—a picture of a famous movie director hung on the wall. Miss Zuckerman noticed their looks, and she said: "A great predecessor and a fantastic role model. This room was once his office."

Of course, The Three Investigators knew that, but they did not say anything. Jupiter only nodded with a smile.

Miss Zuckerman pointed to a sitting area. "Please take a seat. Now, what can I help you with? I don't have a lot of time and Mr Crenshaw hasn't told me much about you."

Jupiter decided to tell a white lie, which had helped them many times before. "Miss Zuckerman, we're working on a school paper about the director Dennis Browne. We'd like some information about that."

"Gladly."

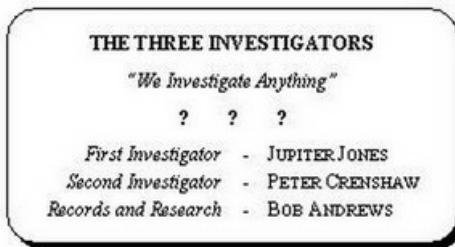
Jupiter asked a few general questions so as not to reveal their true intentions right away. When he noticed that Miss Zuckerman was looking at her watch for the second time, he went to the main purpose of their visit. "Are there any documents that we can look through ourselves? Then we wouldn't take up any more of your precious time..."

Elvira Zuckerman nodded. "Yes, there are indeed... but I'd hate to leave you alone with it. My assistant, Max is looking through the documents on Dennis Browne and compiling the information that is important to me."

"We would like to pay Max a visit then," said Jupiter, and a thought flashed through him. Could Max be the man who had pursued Althena?

"Nothing stands in the way of a visit." Miss Zuckerman picked up the phone and keyed in a number. "Max? There are three young gentlemen wanting to learn something about Dennis Browne... Yes, they are here with me... I'll send them over now, okay?"

She hung up. "No problem, boys! But first, I have a question for you. If I've just heard correctly, your names are the same as on this business card!" She took out a business card from a drawer and placed it in front of The Three Investigators. The completely surprised Jupiter picked it up. The card said:



"I found this card in this old desk," said Miss Zuckerman. "And I read a lot about The Three Investigators in the newspapers. It's nice to meet you three face-to-face, and nice to know that you are still in the business!"

"You're right about that!" Jupiter said. "We have solved many cases."

"Yes, I have read about your liking for mystery and adventure," Miss Zuckerman continued. "Do you have any plans for the holidays?"

The Three Investigators looked at Miss Zuckerman in surprise. "You mean, will we be away?" Jupe asked.

"Yes. If not, I might have an offer for you. I'm looking for bright boys who want to go to a desert island for a few days—San Clemente Island. It's one of the Channel Islands. That's where the original version of *The Pirate's Curse* was shot. My movie company pays for the small trip, only beyond that, we can't pay a fee. The favour I ask from you is to watch the movie with me and then search the island for certain mysterious and spectacular locations that Dennis used back then. Then I don't need to send anyone from my team."

"Is that dangerous?" asked Pete.

Jupiter looked at him sharply.

"Not if you know anything about camping," Miss Zuckerman continued. "But it would get a little lonely out there."

"You intend to shoot the movie on that island?" Jupiter suddenly asked excitedly.

"A few scenes. Of course, computer animation today gives us completely different possibilities than Dennis had back then, but of course we also have to use some real nature shots. We then mix them—like in *Lord of the Rings*, if you might remember. And the scenes from *The Pirate's Curse* were quite impressive."

The Three Investigators looked at each other. A free holiday on a desert island! That sounded really tempting. They would never have hesitated even for a second—but now of all times, they were unfortunately working on a case! They couldn't let Althena down, nor Mrs Livingston.

“This is a wonderful offer,” Jupiter replied thoughtfully. “You will understand that we have to discuss it with our parents and guardians first. We will contact you after we do that.”

“With pleasure! Would that be possible by tomorrow?”

Jupiter swallowed and nodded.

“Good. My secretary will take you to Max now.”

Max’s office was in an adjacent building. The small group crossed the car park and entered a narrow, flat building. The Three Investigators had a weak stomach. If Max was the man who had been following Althena, it could be quite dangerous. Good thing that there were three of them.

The secretary opened a door and took a few steps into the room. Carefully The Three Investigators followed her. The room was not large. There was a window, a movie poster, a shelf with boxes, two chairs, and a table. Jupiter recognized the table immediately—it was the carved palm tree! On it, Althena had photographed the copy of the letter! On the wall in the background hung the mirror in which the hand with the gun had been reflected in the photo. Only the producer’s assistant was not there.

“Max will probably be here soon,” said the secretary, clearing her throat. “Excuse me, I have to get back. Would you mind waiting here?”

“Certainly not,” Jupiter said. The secretary then said goodbye.

The Three Investigators let a few seconds pass. Then Bob suggested: “We should take the opportunity to have a look around a little.” He was just about to take a look at the shelf when Pete held him back. “What do we do if it turns out that Max is the one pursuing Althena?”

“There are three of us,” Jupiter said appeasingly. “I hardly think he will hurt us.”

“He has a gun.”

“Hmm...” Jupiter did not feel comfortable in his skin either. They could be caught in a trap. If the secretary had stayed, the situation would have been easier.

“It will be best if only two of us wait for this Max,” Jupiter decided. “Pete, you can sneak around the building and see what happens in here through the window. If necessary, you can get help.”

“That’s probably a good plan, Jupe.” Pete was about to start moving when suddenly someone opened the door.

The Three Investigators flinched as if they had been struck by lightning. The person standing there was younger and smaller than the pursuer The Three Investigators had met, and above all, she was a woman.

“Hi,” she said politely. “I’m Max. Max Stevens.”

The expressions of The Three Investigators relaxed a bit, but the surprise was still written all over their faces. “Bob Andrews.”

“Pete Crenshaw.”

“And my name is Jupiter Jones.”

“What can I help you with?”

“Please excuse our confusion,” said Jupiter. “We were expecting a man.”

Max laughed. “This happens to me very often. My name is Maxine, but everyone here calls me Max. So, tell me, why are you here?”

“We are working on a paper on Dennis Browne, the director,” said Jupiter. “We were told by Miss Zuckerman that you are currently looking into his archives and documents.”

“As far as one can speak of the archives,” Max said. “At least nobody knows for sure whether Dennis died at all.”

“Well, that’s certainly one of the facts that make a presentation on Dennis a little more exciting than homework in general,” Jupiter said mischievously.

“I can imagine. You seem like very bright boys.” Max walked up to the shelf and turned around. “So what are you interested in?”

“For everything connected with the movie *The Pirate’s Curse*.” Jupiter followed her around a bit.

“I’ve already looked through them,” she said. “A few documents are still at Elvira’s place but she’s already given me some material back.” She pulled a cardboard box from the bottom shelf.

“We are also interested in a letter,” said Jupiter.

Max laughed. “There are plenty of letters—” She broke off and looked at Jupiter. “Uh, what’s wrong?”

Jupiter was not listening as he was staring out the window. A man looked in at them! There was no doubt about it—it was the man with the gun—the one who looked like Ray Liotta!

7. On a Hot Track

The shock lasted only a few seconds. "Have you seen that man before?" Jupiter then asked.

"What man?" Max asked.

"The one who was looking through the window just now," Jupiter said.

"What?" Max replied in surprise. "I didn't see anyone."

"And you?" he asked his friends.

Bob and Pete shook their heads. They had been concentrating on the documents.

"Never mind. I'll be right back," Jupiter cried and spurted out of the room.

He ran down the corridor, then through the outer door. The afternoon heat was beating down on him. Jupiter reached the corner of the building, stopped and took a quick look at the area behind it. Nothing—just a well-kept lawn and a few bushes. Carefully and with some distance, Jupiter walked along a small driveway to see behind the bushes better. But nobody was hiding there. Apparently the man had been faster.

Suddenly a car started behind Jupiter. The tyres squealed like in a movie. Jupiter turned around and could barely make out a silver Chrysler, which roared away.

Disappointed, Jupiter trotted back to his friends and Max, who looked at him stunned as he entered the room.

"What had just got into you?" Pete asked.

"I just thought I recognized someone," Jupiter said indefinitely. "But I must have been mistaken."

Max shrugged her shoulders. "I see. What else can I help you with?"

Jupiter focussed on the actual purpose of their visit. "We know through our research that Dennis Browne was in contact with a prison inmate, a certain Franco. Is there any documentation of that?"

"Franco, yes, that tells me something. There is a short letter. Judging by the writing, Dennis must have copied it down. But there is nothing essential in the letter. I didn't know that Franco was in prison."

Max thought about it for a moment, then she pulled out another box. "It must be in here." She went to the table, opened the box, and poured a jumble of papers out on the tabletop.

While The Three Investigators looked with interest, Max checked the papers one by one. "I don't believe it," she said after a while. She put the last sheet aside and lifted her head in amazement. "The letter is gone! Simply disappeared! I had it in my hands just a few days ago!"

"How come?" asked Bob.

"How come I took it out?" Max asked. "Well, a man enquired about it over the phone. He pretended to be the nephew of Dennis Browne."

Bob stroked his hair. "You just said he pretended to be his nephew. Didn't you believe him?"

Max made an indeterminate hand movement. "Yes, at first. I told him that I had such a letter in my files. The man thanked me and said he wanted to come by, but he never showed up. Meanwhile, I found out that Browne had no nephew at all!"

“Strange,” Jupiter said as he took a look at some of the other documents. Then he casually pointed at the movie poster that hung on the wall next to the shelf. “A scene from *The Pirate’s Curse*,” he said.

Max nodded. “Nice poster, isn’t it? Well, back then...”

“Yes, that was great,” said Jupiter. “Does the wreck still exist?”

“It’s probably still on the island where the movie was shot.”

“Interesting,” Jupiter said and decided to end the conversation. “Max, thank you for your information! I think we’ve seen enough material.”

“Gladly. Come back if you need anything else!”

“We will do that,” said Jupiter.

The Three Investigators turned to the door, but Jupiter turned around again. “Oh yes, I almost forgot. Did a girl visit you the day before yesterday to ask for material on Dennis Browne?”

“The day before yesterday? That was Thursday,” A smile flashed across her face. “No, certainly not. The past Thursday, Elvira kindly took me to an actor casting. We looked at candidates for a few supporting roles, and we were there the whole day.”

“Was anyone here in your office?” Jupiter asked.

“No, nobody else was here that day,” Max replied. “This building is locked when we are out.”

“Why did you race out of the room earlier as if stung by a tarantula,” Pete asked the moment they stepped out of the building.

“Guess what?” Jupiter asked.

“The man who pursued Althena?” Bob surmised.

“Right. He looked through the window. Unfortunately, I didn’t see him again. I wonder what he was doing here.”

“Apparently he’s stalking us,” Bob surmised. “I find this all rather strange—that Mrs Livingston giving Althena an assignment, the director whose whereabouts nobody knows exactly, the man with the gun... and we have no idea whether Althena has been abducted or whether it’s all a trap.”

“Are you saying that we might be led into solving a mystery for a stranger and just before the end, this stranger comes up and collects the reward?” Pete asked.

“Possible...” Bob mumbled.

“That’s happened to us before,” Pete said. “Maybe this Max is behind it, for whatever reason.”

“She was too cooperative for that,” said Jupiter. “But you are right. You never know. In any case we’ll check her alibi!”

“Assuming what she told us is correct, Althena must have been in her office in Max’s absence. She can handle a lock pick just like Pete. Maybe she broke in there to look through the files, found the letter and was surprised by the man with the gun.”

“I wonder if this man with the gun is also the caller who pretended to be Dennis Browne’s nephew?” Bob asked.

“I would bet on it,” said Jupiter.

In the meantime, The Three Investigators had reached Bob’s car and they got in.

“Let’s get back to Headquarters quickly,” Jupiter suggested. “I have another idea.”

“What is it?” asked Pete.

“It’s about our holiday,” Jupiter said and smiled mischievously.

But before Jupiter came up with his holiday idea, Bob had to check Max's alibi. He called Elvira Zuckerman and also made a call to the casting agency. Max's information was correct—at least, she could not have met Althena the past Thursday.

Once that was cleared up, The Three Investigators speculated for a while about the man with the gun. Was he acting on his own behalf? For someone else? Or was he perhaps an insurance agent who tracked down stolen items? That could also be possible because The Three Investigators agreed on one thing—the key to everything had to be the gold figurines Mrs Livingston told them about and which her brother had once stolen. It had never turned up, but for some reason, it had suddenly become the centre of attention again. It must be connected with the letter Althena had photographed.

The Three Investigators remained silent and sat around idly for a while. Althena had still not contacted them. At some point, Jupiter started to tamper with the Internet.

Slowly it was evening. Pete yawned and watched the last rays of sunshine that penetrated through a window of the trailer, reflected and scattered by the scrap piled up in front of Headquarters. His thoughts went to the party on the beach, which was probably in an advanced stage by now.

“I ask for attention again,” Jupiter said loudly and turned away from the computer.

Pete and Bob were instantly torn from their thoughts.

“I wonder,” Jupiter continued, “why you are not curious about my holiday plans?”

“Yes, yes,” Bob hurried to say.

Pete added: “That almost sounds a bit like the great Jupiter Jones show! You usually don't tell us anything until much later when the stage is set for your performance...”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “You're not entirely wrong about that, Pete. While you were dreaming, presumably thinking about the missed party at the beach, I was figuring things out.”

“And something came out of it?” Pete asked somewhat impudently. He couldn't stand it when Jupiter took too long to explain his findings.

“Mrs Livingston reported,” Jupiter continued unmoved, “that her brother Franco had stolen valuable gold figurines from a museum in San Francisco. When he arrived in Los Angeles, the stolen items were not with him. You remember that?”

“He should have hidden the items on the way here,” Pete remarked. “So what?”

“Please don't interrupt me, Pete,” said Jupiter. “Of course he had hidden them. However, he was arrested before he got to reveal the hiding place to his sister.”

“That's why he wrote her that letter from prison,” Bob interjected. “There he tried to tell her the secret hiding place. We know that too.”

“But she did not understand his message. No one understood it,” said Jupiter. “No one except Dennis Browne, who had been doing research on Franco's life for a movie.”

“Excuse me?” Pete wondered.

“Yes. Dennis was planning a movie about the life of the criminal. Mrs Livingston told us about it. And from the documents Max showed us, I read that there was a lot of complications when Dennis Browne gave up the project. It all happened so sudden when he abandoned his project and hurriedly shot a pirate movie. Isn't that strange?”

Pete and Bob nodded. Now that Jupiter had their attention, he chose to take a break.

“Why didn't Dennis continue to make the movie about Franco?” Pete asked.

Jupiter smiled. “Because he knew something about the treasure! And so, he was after it!”

“Wow!” said Pete. “No one has solved Franco's puzzle except Dennis Browne!”

“... And Jupiter Jones,” Bob added. “Admit it, Jupe! You know where the gold figurines are!”

Jupiter nodded. “It took a while before you listened to me properly,” he said. He cleared his throat. “At least, I have a hunch.”

“And what does that have to do with the holiday?” Pete asked.

“Let me finish! The letter says something about a ‘Bianca’. *Bianca*, as we learned from Mrs Livingston, is a yacht.”

“But she said that the yacht is in Europe, Jupe! That can have nothing to do with this case,” Pete exclaimed.

“Yes. It’s a yacht, but Franco did not want to say a yacht directly in the letter. Instead, he used the name of a yacht that possibly only he and his sister knew. So, it is simply the reference to a yacht. That is supposed to mean that Franco used a yacht to go somewhere.” Jupiter brought the letter to the screen. “Where did Franco visit by a yacht before he was arrested?”

“Maybe he sunk the figurines in the sea,” Pete speculated.

“Oh, Pete, no!” Jupe exclaimed. “That couldn’t be it!”

“Franco went by yacht to visit Celeste Landismann... but who is she?” Bob asked.

“Remember Mrs Livingston said that she had never heard of the name ‘Celeste Landismann’?” Jupe recalled.

“Yes, but I find it strange that Franco also mentioned that both Bianca and Celeste send their regards to his sister. Did he not realize that his sister may not know or remember who these people are?” Bob wondered.

“‘Landismann’ is not a common surname so if Mrs Livingston said that she has never heard of it, I believe her,” Jupe continued. “But I have figured something out of this...”

“Okay,” Pete said, annoyed. “Don’t keep us guessing. Just come out with it, Jupe.”

“The name ‘Celeste Landismann’ is an anagram—the letters from where you could use to make another word or words in a different order...” Jupiter took a pencil and wrote the name on a piece of paper.

“So what did you come up with?” Pete asked.

Jupiter rearranged the letters and came up with... ‘San Clemente Island’!

“Wow!” Pete was flattened. “Jupe, you solved it all by yourself!”

Jupiter smiled, flattered. “Well, I admittedly had it a bit easier than Browne, but I didn’t initially suspect that Franco used an anagram to encode a message to his sister. When Mrs Livingston wasn’t sure of ‘Bianca’ and had never even heard of ‘Celeste Landismann’, I knew that Franco encrypted a message into these two names... and he did! Of course, Miss Zuckerman also mentioned San Clemente Island, and I have long suspected that these cases are somehow connected.”

“So Franco didn’t want to make it that easy for the prison control,” Pete remarked.

“Coming back to Dennis Browne, that’s why he switched to the pirate movie so suddenly back then,” cried Bob. “With this cover-up, he could look around for the gold figurines without attracting attention!” Bob paused. “But that island is big! How did he start? Franco’s letter must have more information on the location of the treasure!”

“I have thought about that too,” said Jupiter proudly.

“Bravo, Jupe!” Pete shook his head.

“But I need your help—one step at a time...” said Jupiter. “We have now figured out what ‘Bianca’ and ‘Celeste Landismann’ refer to, but the names ‘Carlos’ and ‘Ronaldo’ are still there. Well, ‘Carlos’ and ‘Ronaldo’ are, according to my checks on the Internet, the

names of characters from an old movie called *The Treasure of the Indians*. Unfortunately I do not know of this movie, but it seems to be quite a bad one."

"Aha! That, you can rely on me," said Pete. "It's an old movie where two men set off to search for a treasure. Although I cannot recall the character names of 'Carlos' or 'Ronaldo', but I remember the general storyline. In the end, the heroes found the treasure by a waterfall."

Jupiter Jones smiled proudly. "We really are a great trio! Pete, I bet there is a waterfall on the island! And I hope that Dennis Browne hasn't found the treasure yet!"

Pete beamed and then asked: "So how do we proceed from here?"

"Fellas, we're taking Elvira Zuckerman's offer," Jupe announced. "We're going to San Clemente Island!"

It was not difficult to convince Pete's and Bob's parents of the small trip. On the contrary, they thought it was fabulous that the well-known producer had invited their boys for a few days out in nature, away from the smog in the city.

Aunt Mathilda, who after phone calls with Pete's and Bob's parents, told Jupiter in the kitchen that she was convinced and delighted. "You'll have a great time relaxing on San Clemente Island, my dear," she said, gently stroking her nephew's hair. "If there's one place that's safe from criminals, it's San Clemente Island."

"Why?" asked Jupiter as he straightened his hair.

"Because the island is a restricted area occupied by the US Navy. There are only a few navy people there... but of course, Hollywood has special permission for everything..."

"Oh." Jupiter decided to ask Bob to check on this. He gulped down a few spoonfuls of the stew that was on the cooker and ran off to Headquarters.

He was alone in the trailer when he grabbed the phone and called Elvira Zuckerman. He arranged to meet the next day to watch the old movie together at her office. In the afternoon, they would travel by helicopter to San Clemente Island.

Jupiter hung up and smiled to himself. "That went faster than I thought!"

8. Althena's Message

The next morning, on a Sunday, Jupiter woke up a bit later than usual. He was to meet Pete and Bob before going to Miss Zuckerman's office in an hour's time.

In the kitchen, it smelled wonderfully of coffee and eggs. He gobbled down his breakfast and was just about to run off to his two friends who were already at Headquarters when Aunt Mathilda called him back. "Jupe, there was a letter for you in the letter box."

She fumbled around her apron and took out a small brown envelope, on the front of which was a thick wording that said: 'To The Three Investigators'.

"That must mean you," Aunt Mathilda said and grinned incorrigibly. "Probably a new case, Jupe! Oh, I'm so glad you're going to that island!"

Jupiter curiously accepted the envelope. There was no stamp on it or postmark of any kind. That could only mean that it was delivered personally. "When did this letter arrive?" he asked.

"How should I know?" Aunt Mathilda said. "I just found it this morning. It could have been delivered yesterday after I cleared the letter box in the afternoon."

"Thank you." Jupiter hurried to get to Headquarters.

Bob and Pete was at the computer. Jupiter interrupted them excitedly and waved the brown envelope in the air. "There's something here for us!"

Pete and Bob jumped up and sat down with Jupiter at the table. With a letter opener, he carefully opened the envelope. A folded white sheet of paper fell out. He grabbed it by the outer edges and laid it on the table. It said:

Dear Jupiter, Peter and Rob,

Do not worry about me. I am fine. I'll call you when it's all over.

Greetings from Athena.

"Wait a minute!" Pete wondered. "What's this all about?"

"Clearly, there is something wrong with the message," said the First Investigator thoughtfully.

Pete grinned. "Okay, I can see that she addressed us as 'Peter' and 'Rob'," he said. "I don't think that she had forgotten or made a mistake with our preferred names of 'Pete' and 'Bob'."

"There's some other intention behind it," Jupiter surmised. "She is trying to tell us that this letter was forced upon her."

Bob grinned wider. "Exactly. She even wrongly spelled her own name—or alias for that matter. It's 'Althena', not 'Athena'. The 'L' is missing."

"She could have written the letter under pressure. Someone gave her the message," Jupe surmised. "Perhaps she did not succeed in escaping after all! And the names were to secretly draw our attention to the fact that the letter was written under duress."

"As I can see, there is no other information encoded here," muttered Bob.

"So we only have the photos on the camera," Pete recalled.

“Seventeen photos,” Bob added.

“I bet that man abducted her. Maybe he had a car somewhere and he followed the bus,” Jupe said. “Pete, did you keep your eyes on that man the whole time?”

Pete scratched his head. “I must have looked at the bus for at least twenty seconds,” he said.

“There you go! I can understand that the man wants to get the gold figurines. He has Althena under control. Suddenly we show up and look for her. Then the man sees us in Max’s office. To put us off-track, the man forces Althena to write this letter, but she hides a message in it—by using wrongly-spelled names. I think this can only mean one thing. We have to solve the puzzle in the letter and then we will find her as well! And my friends, the solution is on the island!”

“Then we are on the right track,” Bob remarked.

Pete looked doubtfully at his friends. “Or is it another trap for us? The man wants us to think that Althena has been abducted and he wants to lure us to the island to find the treasure for him or someone else,” he said. “Actually, we’re not much smarter than before.”

“Never mind. The trip there is our only option,” Jupe said.

But Bob was not entirely satisfied. Thoughtfully, he stroked his hair. “If only we knew what had happened to Althena. Going to the island is the right decision when it comes to solving the mystery of the gold figurines. But are we helping Althena with it?”

“She gave us the camera with the clues,” said Jupiter. “Let’s trust her.”

The sea slid under them like a glittering blue carpet. A large freighter appeared in the distance, and very soon, it even came closer and disappeared under them. Jupiter, Pete and Bob had each been given a window seat. Pete had even been allowed to sit next to the helicopter pilot. As proud as he was at first, he regretted his luck in the meantime. The clear view through the glass dome below him intensified his feeling of nausea, which had quickly arisen due to the restless flight. Jupiter and Bob held on better, even though Bob had his eyes fixed on the horizon.

Bob had earlier checked on some information about the island. San Clemente Island lay off the coast of Southern California. It was the southernmost of the Channel Islands of California. The whole island was a base of the US Navy and it was used for sea, air and land tactical training. The entry of civilians was highly restricted and carefully regulated. Unless scheduled for military training and testing activities, certain sections of the island were available to civilians for recreational and commercial activities such as fishing, diving, and sailing.

Geologically, the island was composed primarily of volcanic rock. It had some incredible deep canyons, caves, caverns, streams, pools of fresh water and waterfalls—yes, waterfalls! The flora of the island included some plant species and wild flowers found nowhere else in the world. No wonder such wonderful natural settings attracted movie companies to want to film there. Of course, they had to secure permission to do so, as what Miss Zuckerman had done.

After a while, the pilot pointed forward. In the haze, a long-shaped island became dimly visible. It was San Clemente Island. The pilot approached his destination and sent some radio messages announcing his arrival.

Soon the elevations of the island were visible. The pilot changed course and turned into a long curve, so that Pete and Bob, who sat on the left side of the plane, could follow the coast of the island. One sandy beach followed the next. Fascinated and curious, they looked out the

window and their backs were tingling with anticipation. This was where they would spend the next few days—alone... in search of a treasure!

The pilot now steered the helicopter towards the interior of the island. “I’m not allowed to fly you over that small strip on the coast,” he explained, “because that’s a military restricted area! But some parts of the island is completely untouched. You are really very lucky to be allowed to come here! I suppose you have been told which areas you can explore.”

“Yes,” Bob replied.

Now they saw impassable bushes, parts of woods, rocks, a narrow waterfall, which poured into an azure blue lake. There it was. Their pulse beat faster. Then the terrain became flatter again and they came to the other side of the island. Here it was wilder and rockier than on the east side, but between the rocks there were always small coves with light-coloured sandy beaches.

The helicopter went lower and flew towards a rocky outcrop. Once over it, they came to a view of a dreamlike bay. Directly below them, wedged between two rocks, was the pirate wreck. The pilot left the helicopter in the air above the wreck for a few seconds so that The Three Investigators could enjoy the sight. Then he flew slowly towards a flat field that adjoined the beach. The rock walls that surrounded it towards the interior of the island were far enough away so that the helicopter could land safely. Very soon, the aircraft touched down and they were at their destination!

The Three Investigators staggered onto the ground and looked around in amazement.

“Wow! This place is incredibly beautiful!” Pete remarked.

A few moments later, the pilot also got out. “Miss Zuckerman didn’t promise you too much, did she?” he called out against the noise of the rotor. “I envy you! But unfortunately I have to go right back, I have another flight assignment today. I’ll help you quickly with the unloading. And please check your mobile phones. They are your only connection to the outside world. Remember to stick to the area you are allowed to go, else you could get into trouble with the Navy. If you want to get back before the agreed time, call me and I’ll be here three hours later. Otherwise as agreed, I’ll see you in four days! Same time, same place!”

The Three Investigators had each taken a mobile phone with them. They switched them on and the connection worked. Then they unloaded their luggage together.

The pilot said goodbye and got back into the helicopter. He gave them a thumbs-up in a good mood. Then he took off, left the helicopter a few metres above the ground, turned to the sea side and headed off towards the evening sun which was already approaching the horizon.

Soon the sound of the rotors ebbed, it became silent. All The Three Investigators could hear was the wind blowing through the rocks, the waves on the beach and the cries of some seagulls.

Now they were alone.

9. The Wreck

“We should put up the tent quickly,” said Jupiter. “It will soon be dark.”

Bob and Pete nodded.

They chose a flat spot on a field near a small rock and within sight of the wreck. After having cleared the area from stones and driftwood, they pitched the tent. When they had stowed their backpacks inside the tent, the sun had disappeared.

All of a sudden, as Pete found, it seemed to become cooler, the sea became darker, and the cliffs surrounding the bay seemed threatening.

Jupiter cast a suspicious glance at his friend. “We humans are all too easily impressed by such outward appearances,” he said. “Now that we have stowed everything away, I suggest we pay the wreck a visit. The twilight still offers enough light.” He grabbed his flashlight and set off.

The wreck lay between two rocks as if a storm had washed it there. When he reached the shallow water that surrounded the rock with the wreck, he turned around. A few metres behind him, Bob followed. Pete, on the other hand, was just trotting away from the tent. But Jupiter was now too impatient to wait. He turned back towards the wreck and with a skill that was astonishing for his stature, he jumped over the slippery boulders without getting into the water.

A short time later, he was already climbing up to the wreck. When he reached it, he stopped and listened. The wind stroked the planks. Behind him Bob gasped. Jupiter climbed into an opening.

At that moment, Pete had just reached the water. He didn’t like having to go to that eerie wreck now. “Why don’t we stay in the tent tonight,” he grumbled to himself. “Tomorrow is another day after all!” Undecidedly he looked at his friends. Now Bob had also gone into the wreck. Finally, he gave himself a jolt and started walking.

“The decorators have done a great job,” cried Jupiter from inside the ship. His voice vibrated with the urge to explore. “Originally this was a fishing cutter! … Ouch! Here is broken glass! And there’s a rusty film reel lying there!”

“How on earth did you get dry?” cried Pete. “There’s water all around here!”

“Jump over the stones! Don’t be a baby!” Bob said.

“But I don’t have a flashlight…” Pete argued.

“My goodness, Pete, sometimes you’re like a little kid!” Bob remarked.

“Give me some light!” Pete, annoyed, set foot on a dark spot rising out of the water. His foot slipped off to the side. “Darn!” Pete slumped to one side and reached into the cold water to prevent himself falling. Something plopped into the sea.

“Where are you?” cried Jupiter, who looked out of the wreck.

Now Pete was hit by the beam from Jupiter’s flashlight. It shone beneath the water surface.

“Oh no! My mobile phone!” As if it would still help, Pete quickly pulled the phone out of the water. He pressed a few buttons. But the phone was as lifeless as a dead fish.

Jupiter and Bob broke off their examination of the wreck and made their way over the rocks.

“That was my best phone ever,” yelled Pete, and in a fit of anger, he threw the phone back on the beach in a high arc. “If that isn’t a nasty sign of our mission!”

“Let it go!” Jupiter had approached, and Pete could see that he was upset. “If you hadn’t stumbled so listlessly on the rocks—”

“Now you’re gonna be on my back as well?” cried Pete. “Why do you have to go to this wreck now?” Pete turned around and stomped back to land. He took the direct route, and his exclusive trainers splashed through the water step by step.

Bob watched, shaking his head. “Whoever puts on fine sneakers on the beach... Come on, Jupe, let’s eat something. I’ve had enough adventures for today, and we really won’t get far with our investigation in the dark.”

The next two hours of the evening passed without further incidents. The Three Investigators prepared their dinner—three boring cans of supermarket ravioli. They then used Bob’s mobile phone to call their worried parents and Aunt Mathilda that all was well with them and that they would not be in touch for some time. As a precaution, they didn’t tell them about Pete’s damaged mobile phone.

When the duty was done, they started planning for the next day. Officially, they were supposed to look around for possible movie locations, but Jupiter naturally wanted to solve the puzzle from the letter as quickly as possible, not least because he hoped that it would give him a clue to Althena’s whereabouts.

“I want to go to the beach again,” Pete announced, as it was on the line whether they should all go to sleep or chat a little more. “Are you coming with me? I want to find my mobile phone.”

“Can it wait till tomorrow?” Bob asked and yawned. “That thing’s got nothing but junk value.”

“But the SIM card may still be okay. It was only in the water for a short time. I have many text messages stored there...”

“Ours or Kelly’s?” Jupiter laughed.

Kelly was Pete’s girlfriend, at least when they hadn’t broken up at short notice again. This had been going on for some time now, and Pete’s SIM card had become a small documentation of their most important ups and downs.

Pete suspected what his friend was thinking. “I only keep the nice text messages,” he said with a grin.

“So those were from us!” Jupiter smiled back. “In any case I have nothing against a little trip. Do you remember roughly where you threw it after your little disaster?”

“I should be able to find it.” Pete got out of the tent and grabbed his sneakers, which had been left to dry on the grass. His former pride and joy were now salt-glued and stank of seaweed. To make matters worse, Pete had only himself to blame. Disgruntled, he put on his wet shoes and grabbed a flashlight. Jupiter and Bob followed him.

Together they set off to search the area on the beach where Pete had thrown his mobile phone. But no matter how hard they tried, they could not find the device. Finally, a little further on, in the damp grass, Pete found the battery cover.

“That must be the one from my mobile phone,” he called and waved his friends over to him. He lit up the immediate surroundings. “But my phone somehow is not here!”

“A quite daring thesis,” said Jupiter after he had looked at the black plastic part. “On the other hand, it cannot be completely dismissed.” They searched further, but the device was simply not there.

“Strange,” Bob thought, “since when do mobile phones disappear into thin air...”

“Can it be that we are not alone on this island?” Pete asked gloomily. “Someone must have taken the phone...”

“True. The navy personnel still live here,” Jupiter said with little conviction.

Pete shook his head. “But the military area is quite a distance away from here!”

“By daylight, we will find your mobile phone,” said Jupiter. “We don’t have to paint a gloomy picture now.”

Pete looked at Jupiter doubtfully. A mobile phone could not just disconnect from the battery cover and disappear like that. Was the island perhaps cursed? Frowning, he let the black plastic cover slide into his trouser pocket.

The Three Investigators went back into their tent and rolled out their sleeping bags. When Pete was about to zip up the tent door, he took a look at the wreck which was stuck between the rocks. There was something there! He blinked. He looked closer and squeezed his eyes tightly together.

“Just go to sleep,” Bob muttered and crawled into his sleeping bag. “Tomorrow is another day.”

Pete stuttered off: “That’s not it... there was a light... there was a light in the wreck...”

“Are you sure?” Jupiter pushed Pete aside and stared into the night. “Nothing to see,” he said, visibly disappointed.

Pete rubbed his eyes. “It seemed to me as if a light had flickered inside the wreck,” he said. “Now I can’t see it. I must have been mistaken. The day must have been a little long.”

Jupiter yawned and Pete zipped up the tent door. Actually, Pete knew he had not been mistaken! There had been a light, but they were supposedly alone on this island! If it was not a human being, then it had to be a ghost. Up to now, every ghost they had met had regularly turned out to be a mean human being, but there was always a first time. If he were to tell Jupiter of his fears now, his friend would surely march straight to the wreck to convince him otherwise. So he better not say anything. But he lay awake for a long time and listened to all the noises that seemed suspicious to him. And there were many more that night...

10. The Three Fire Fighters

The sun was already burning down from the sky when The Three Investigators crawled tiredly out of their sleeping bags. The other two investigators had not slept very well either—Jupiter, because of the ridiculous dreams he had, and Bob, because a stone had poked up his thin mattress.

The waves were roaring harder than the night before, and when The Three Investigators looked out of the tent, they realized that it wasn't so easy to get to the wreck today. Somewhere out in the Pacific, there must have been a storm last night and the waves were rolling in high.

The boys got out of the tent and brushed their teeth, Jupiter took a little longer than the others as usual. He would not be dissuaded. Then they each ate a portion of boring supermarket muesli, accompanied by coffee from canned powder.

But Jupiter Jones liked his breakfast even better than coffee and eggs from Aunt Mathilda. That was because the taste of adventure was in the air. He was sure that today they would find the treasure. Then perhaps it would also become clear what had happened to Althena. Was she really in danger? Or was it all just a trick to lure them on the trail? Either way, they had to be careful.

“Check your mobile phones,” he ordered. “I mean your mobile phone, Bob. And your backpacks, compass, knife, rope... We have to fight our way through a lot of undergrowth. The waterfall lies far inland.”

“And when are we going to look for my mobile phone?” Pete asked. “I don’t want to leave it there.”

“Can’t you see that the treasure comes first?” Jupe questioned.

“No.”

“The treasure leads to Althena,” Jupe said. “We have to solve the puzzle!”

“Okay.”

“There you go.” The First Investigator put on his backpack. “Let’s go!”

The three friends strapped on their backpacks and took a look at the wreck. This, too, had to wait, as well as the search for suitable movie locations, until they had solved their main task—to find the gold figurines that had been hidden for so long!

If San Clemente Island looked dark and rugged from the air, then on the ground, the island’s landscape took on a dazzling complexity and beauty. Native plants grew in unusual shades of red, pink, orange, and yellow colours. On some hillsides, fields of grasses ranged in colour from green to yellow. Rising above this spectacular landscape were outcroppings of lava rock, and in the distance, the blue sea glistened.

In the beginning, the way up the hill was still rather simple. The three friends stomped to the rocks that enclosed the bay. Pete had found a spot where even Jupiter, who didn’t like climbing, could reach the plateau halfway safely. But the path was steep and brittle all the same, and the sun burned down on them relentlessly. After only a few metres, Pete desperately wished to return to the beach.

When they had finally reached the ridge, the next hurdle was a bushy, impassable plain which slowly rose to some wooded hills. Between two distant hills was the waterfall that they had seen earlier on board the helicopter. They turned around and looked down on their bay as they left. The tent fluttered in the wind and the wreck between the rocks shone black. The Three Investigators were about to turn away when Jupiter noticed something.

“Smoke!” he yelled.

“Excuse me?” Pete asked, but now, he and Bob saw it too.

A whitish plume of smoke rose from the wreck, which quickly disappeared in the wind. It seemed to grow stronger slowly.

“The pirate ship is burning!” cried Jupiter. “We have to go back!”

“Why?” asked Bob. “Let’s let the wreck burn. What do we care! I don’t feel like climbing back down!”

“But there’s something wrong!” Jupiter did not turn his eyes away from the ship. “A wreck doesn’t just burn!”

“I told you so,” Pete intervened. “We are not alone on the island!”

Jupiter turned to him. “If you are right, we have to find out who this person is as quickly as possible. I tell you—we are going back!”

Once again, the First Investigator had prevailed. As fast as they could, The Three Investigators climbed back down the hill. The descent was more difficult than the ascent. Again and again, rocks came loose and rolled down.

When The Three Investigators reached the plain, the plume of smoke could not be missed despite the wind. They rushed across the field. Near their tent, they threw off their backpacks. Jupiter opened a side pocket and pulled out a rope. He ran behind the tent and grabbed a plastic bucket. While running off, he tied the rope around the handle. The Three Investigators quickly stalked through the water.

On port side of the wreck, some boards of the hull had burst open wide enough for Jupiter to enter the interior of the pirate wreck the night before. From time to time, the wind pushed a cloud of smoke through.

First Jupiter climbed through the opening, followed by Bob and Pete. They were in the hull of the wreck. Through a large cargo hatch above them, sun rays fell into the interior. In front of them, a mountain of alluvial wood, beams and a rotten wooden crate, probably piled up over the years, burned. The fire threatened to spread to the deck. Some of the ship’s planks were already smoking.

Quickly Jupiter climbed through the hatch on deck and pulled the bucket after him. He looked around briefly. At first glance, there didn’t seem to be a human being up here. He ran to the railing, threw the bucket overboard on the side facing the sea, scooped up water and then splashed the whole load through the hatch in a gush.

“Man! Watch it!” Pete was soaking wet.

“Oh!” Jupiter repeated the process, but this time he aimed better.

It hissed and smoked. Bob and Pete also climbed on deck. Jupiter dumped the third load of water and handed it over to Bob, who tipped a few more buckets after it. Finally, the fire was out. To be on the safe side, Pete poured a few more buckets of water in various parts of the deck. Then he happily placed the bucket down.

“The Three Fire Fighters!” Bob said and laughed. “We extinguish anything!”

“I feel more like a watered poodle,” Pete muttered.

“Sorry,” said Jupiter. “This happened in the heat of the moment. I’m sorry. Now you really stink of the sea, Seaweed-Pete!”

Pete looked down at his T-shirt. Dark strips of seaweed were indeed sticking out of it. Disgruntled, he plucked them off and threw them into the sea.

“Do you believe me now that we are not alone on the island?” he asked. “Maybe the arsonist is sitting on a rock somewhere, laughing half to death!”

“To get closer to the answer to this question, it is helpful to investigate the source of the fire,” replied Jupiter.

They climbed through the hatch. A bitter stench welcomed them and they had to breath shallowly. Jupiter approached the scene of the fire. A few rays of sunlight fell on the charred and sooty pile of wood.

“You were here last night,” said Pete. “Was the wood already there?”

“Yes, I think so. I haven’t looked around any more because you dropped your phone... you know why.”

“I remember vaguely,” said Pete.

Jupiter suddenly bent down and picked up a piece of glass which was sooty. He turned it in the sunlight. “Must have come from the bottom of a bottle,” he said.

“Pete, look out, there’s an evil genie in the bottle!” grinned Bob.

“Ha ha ha!” Pete playfully threatened him with his fist.

“Not a genie in a bottle,” said Jupiter thoughtfully, “and perhaps not an arsonist either. The fire may well be from a natural cause.”

He cleaned the soot from the shard and held it up to the sunlight. The glass concentrated the rays into a single, very bright bundle, like a magnifying glass. “You see? This can focus the sunlight to ignite the wood.”

“But why didn’t this happen yesterday? Or the day before yesterday? Or ten years ago?” asked Pete.

“A good question,” Jupiter said and thought.

“Because you stepped on glass last night, Jupe. Perhaps you shifted its position and the rays fell on something easily flammable.”

“This is a possibility!” Jupiter nodded. “You see, Pete, everything can have a natural explanation.”

Jupiter searched a little more on the deck of the pirate ship, picked up several other pieces of broken glass and compared them thoughtfully. Finally, he wrapped the evidence in a handkerchief to take it with him.

“Now that we’re here, let’s have a closer inspection of the rest of the ship before we set off again,” he said.

As the stench was almost unbearable, Pete and Bob gladly accepted Jupiter’s suggestion and climbed through the opening on deck. They had skilfully converted an old fishing cutter into a pirate ship. The ship must have been painted completely black for the filming, or at least that’s what the remains of paint on the sun-burnt wood suggested. In some more sheltered places, the paint was relatively well-preserved. Apparently it had only been used for outdoor shots, and the scenes inside the ship had been shot in a different setting.

They went to the door to the galley, which was surprisingly well-preserved. Jupiter wanted to open it, but it was locked with a padlock. He shook it. “Strange. This padlock is not very old.”

“Shall I get my lock pick set?” Pete asked.

Bob shook his head. “We are running out of time. If we keep this up, we won’t get to the waterfall today.”

Jupiter fought with himself. Bob was undoubtedly right, but on the other hand his untiring curiosity plagued him. “Very well,” he said after a few moments. “Let’s get out of

here.”

They climbed back through the shallow water. When they reached the beach, Pete made another turn to the area where he thought his mobile phone was. Something reflected in the sun.

“There it is,” he shouted in surprise. “My mobile phone! Look! The cover is missing... and mine fits! Strange that we didn’t find it last night...”

“Probably we lit up the wrong places,” Bob said, making an impatient gesture that they should move on. “You see, all mysteries are solved!”

But Pete was not convinced. Something was not right here. Thoughtfully, he ran behind Jupiter and Bob to their fluttering tent.

11. The Danger Grows

In view of the lost time spent putting out the fire, Jupiter decided that they should also take their sleeping bags with them.

“Who knows how long we will need. It is almost noon,” he said. “We may have to spend the night in the interior of the island.”

They strapped their backpacks and set off, climbed up the hill again and looked at the bay from above once more. But now everything seemed peaceful. The waves rushed incessantly and the wreck seemed to be guarding the bay.

It became a difficult path. The Three Investigators fought their way through dense bushes, climbed over boulders, jumped over fissures in the earth. They saw snakes and spiders and were glad that they had reasonably sturdy shoes on. It was far more strenuous than they had expected.

After about an hour, they reached the first shady trees and took a break. They had enough chocolate bars with them, but not much water. They had hoped to find streams in the mountains and the lake. But now they were in no man’s land, in the middle of the wilderness.

The wind had died down again. Under the hot sun, and carrying the heavy backpack, Jupiter had sweated through his T-shirt completely.

“You’re so silent, Jupe,” Bob said and bit his candy bar. “Is it because of the heat?”

“Jupe, admit it! You are tormented by the question whether I am right after all,” Pete said, “that there is someone else around.”

Jupiter nodded. “Something is not right here. I didn’t want to scare you right away, but the piece of glass... it was newer than the others. Its edges were sharper. And it was the only one with perfectly clear glass.” He took it out of his backpack. “Look! There’s a brand name and logo at the bottom. The shard comes from a drinking glass that is no more than ten years old. As far as I could recall, this is the longest this product has been on the market!”

“That doesn’t mean anything yet,” Bob said. “Although the island is forbidden, people may have come here from time to time.”

“You are probably right,” said Jupiter. “I probably see ghosts too!”

After packing their things, they decided to move on. Jupiter got up to get an overview of the best way to go further into the hills towards the waterfall. The sea salt made them feel all sticky and uncomfortable especially with their wet shoes and T-shirts. They had no choice but to get used to it now.

Pete took out his mobile phone. He put the last drops from his water bottle onto a handkerchief and wiped the device clean. Now it was shining again like before. He tried to turn it on but as expected, nothing happened. A little disappointed, he opened the battery compartment. The most important text messages from Kelly were probably lost, in addition to a few messages from The Three Investigators, and a few from this or that girl. Pete removed the battery and it took his breath away. He let out a scream so loud that Bob dropped the camping cups in a flutter.

“The SIM card is gone!” Pete yelled.

“How?” Bob asked.

“Someone has removed the SIM card! This is the proof! There’s definitely someone else on this island!”

Jupiter went to him and looked at the mobile phone. “Not only are we not alone, but we are being watched closely,” he noted.

“Even now?” asked Pete.

“Probably. I suspect it is intended as a warning... or someone wants to unsettle us,” Jupiter suspected. “They want to scare us!”

“Someone may be trying to dissuade us from our mission...” Bob continued to think as he looked around nervously. “Or it could be someone we don’t even expect at the moment.”

Bob and Pete looked at Jupiter questioningly.

Jupiter went on speaking: “What do you think about the fact that that director from back then, Dennis Browne, who everyone thinks is dead, is still alive?”

“He would then have to be very old!” Pete remarked.

“Not very old, perhaps over seventy,” Bob said. “Perhaps he stayed on the island after the filming was over to find the treasure.”

“Remember the locked galley door on the wreck?” Jupe recalled. “It could be one of his homes. If that is the case, he may not have been able to decipher the letter completely, otherwise he would have found the treasure and left the island. He must have been crazy about the treasure.”

“If your assumption is correct... what has he been living on all this time?” Pete wondered.

“Pete! Water and fish are abundant here,” Jupe said. “He may have had support from someone else... but so far it’s nothing more than a theory.”

Bob picked up the cups and packed them. “Or it could be that ‘Ray Liotta’ guy who threatened you two with his gun... Perhaps he knew where we are now!”

“Shouldn’t we call Inspector Cotta for help?” Pete asked. “I find it eerie when we are being watched. Maybe he is not just watching. Whether it’s the old director or ‘Ray Liotta’, the closer we get to the treasure, the more dangerous it becomes for us!”

“What if it’s all a hoax?” Jupe said. “Do we not embarrass ourselves to the bone?”

“Yes,” said Pete. “But I wouldn’t care.”

Jupiter was thinking. “If we called Inspector Cotta, would he believe us?”

“Yes,” said Pete. “So far, we’ve almost always been giving him reliable information.”

“So in this case, what reliable information do you have in mind,” Jupiter asked.

“The missing SIM card had convinced me,” Pete argued. “Also, don’t forget the padlock on the galley door.”

“Would he also go on a treasure hunt with us?” asked Jupiter.

“Yes, why not?” said Pete. “At this moment, we know more about the gold treasure than him. If we do find it together, that would certainly add to his reputation!”

“Not to mention that the police would be better at finding Althena than us,” Bob added.

Jupiter swallowed. He knew exactly that his friends were right. “All right. I’ll call him.”

He opened his backpack and rummaged through it... without success. Then he searched the side pockets. “I was sure I put it in the side pocket!” He started all over again.

Shaking their heads, Pete and Bob watched until Bob’s patience tore. “Why don’t you just take my phone?” He reached into his backpack burrowing. Wrinkles appeared on his forehead. He searched more frantically. Finally, Bob tipped the entire contents onto the ground. All sorts of things came out, but now it was completely out of order—no mobile phone showed up.

“I know for sure that I packed it!” Bob said.

“Me too!” Jupiter interrupted him.

“Well then, good night!” said Pete. “Mr Unknown has struck! There is no help! Now we are at his mercy!”

Jupiter looked up. He was pale and that rarely happened to him. “When did he get to our backpacks?”

“We left our backpacks next to our tent when we were putting out the fire on the wreck,” Bob remembered. “He had planned everything!”

The Three Investigators needed a moment to recover from the shock.

“We can make our way to the military area,” Pete suggested, “and keep rattling the fence until someone comes.”

“... And shoot us? That is within restricted area,” Bob laughed in agony. “Anyway, they are on the other side of the island, even beyond the hills with the waterfall. It will take us a long time to get there!”

Jupiter was thinking. In the meantime, he had regained his composure to some extent. “I suggest we simply continue with our route,” he said. “We will try to find the treasure. Why should we chicken out? When we have successfully solved the puzzle, we will make our way to the military area... or we can return to our bay and wait for the helicopter. Hopefully it will come. But from now on, three things apply—caution, caution and once again caution! We must not behave as stupidly as before!”

“What do you mean?” Pete wanted to know.

“Always stay together, be mindful, explore the path well, keep night watch and—the closer we get to the presumed hiding place of the treasure, we’ll think of a diversion. Why should only our opponent succeed in leading someone astray?”

“Would you take over with the diversion, Jupe?” Pete asked.

“I don’t think I have a choice, Pete...” Jupe said. Bob and Pete nodded. Jupiter was right. Why should they let themselves be beaten?

The Three Investigators packed their things and wandered on. Bob went ahead alertly, followed by Pete and Jupiter brought up the rear.

After a while, the forest became denser and they discovered the paths of animals among the trees and bushes. Now that the view of the small mountains was obscured, it was not easy for Bob to keep the right course.

He entered a clearing from which he could orientate himself better again. They had indeed made a detour. The heat caused him more trouble than he expected. Bob put on his baseball cap as he was already feeling a little dizzy. As he didn’t want to admit his little weakness to the others, he marched on.

When he reached the other edge of the forest, the ground beneath him seemed to sway. Bob staggered to the foot of the nearest tree and sat down for a while. Pete passed the spot, and he too seemed to stagger as if he was drunk.

“Oops, swell in the middle of the land?” Pete laughed and jumped to join Bob.

Shaking his head, Jupiter stomped up to them. “Fellas, not another break—”

In the middle of the sentence, Jupe cried out. Wood splintered, and small branches flew around. Bob and Pete watched in horror as Jupiter disappeared into the ground before them!

12. In a Trap

“Ouch!” Jupiter fell on something soft and damp. Again it cracked beneath him. It became more and more watery and musty.

Desperately, Jupiter tried to get his feet under his body. He felt something cool and slippery sliding up his right leg. His breath faltered. With his hands, he poked around in a swamp-like sauce. He felt something smooth that was slipping away under its own power. Water penetrated his clothes. His legs and arms stung. What was crawling on his hair? With his left hand, he reached out and grabbed a large critter—a spider! Disgusted, he threw it away. The critter fell on a branch, and with lightning-fast movements, it cowered into an opening that resembled a rat hole.

Jupiter discovered with horror that almost the entire pit above him was full of cobwebs, unless he had pulled them down with him. Something was crawling behind his ear.

“Help!” The snake-like creature, which had been climbing up his trouser leg, got stuck between his leg and the tight-fitting jeans. Jupiter swallowed foul-tasting water. This was worse than in any horror movie.

“Get me out of here!” With his right hand, he wiped a tuft of grass and dead insects aside. At last, his feet had found ground. It smelled terrible. He choked. Above him appeared the frightened faces of Bob and Pete.

Pete stretched out a hand. “Come on, Jupe, reach out!”

In the third attempt, Jupiter succeeded in grabbing Pete’s hand. Pete pulled, but he could not possibly pull the heavyweight Jupiter Jones towards him. The ground under Pete’s feet gave way and a fat load of earth landed on Jupiter’s face.

Then Jupiter’s feet found a firm hold. Pete helped as much as he could. Finally, Jupiter reached the edge of the pit. Bob grabbed Jupiter’s other hand, and together Pete and Bob managed to pull their friend back out.

Jupiter dripped and stank of mould. He burped, spat and held his back. With a precise grip, Bob removed two spiders from his neck. Jupiter pointed to his leg.

“Is your leg okay?” asked Bob in horror.

“There’s something in my trousers!” Jupiter gasped.

Now Pete and Bob saw it—a thick, slowly writhing bulge formed on the jeans. Bob pointed with his finger, he was at a loss for words.

“Watch out! Look out! Could be poisonous,” whimpered Jupiter.

As Jupiter seemed to be incapable of doing anything, Bob carefully unbuckled Jupe’s belt. Pete sat down at Jupiter’s feet and pulled the jeans from underneath his trouser legs towards him with all due care. Jupiter’s red and white striped underpants appeared, and then the base of his bulging legs. Suddenly something green and snake-like creature slipped from his leg into the grass and slithered away in a flash.

Jupiter gasped for breath and fell flat on his back.

“Damn! He’s been bitten!” cried Pete. “He’s unconscious!”

“I believe he has just fainted,” Bob said. He shoved a backpack under Jupiter’s legs and muttered: “I’ll put him in the shock position. I learned that once in a school class. So now his legs are elevated and the blood can flow towards his head again.”

After a few moments, Jupiter regained consciousness. He looked as if he had woken up from a bad nightmare. What seemed to bother him even more was that he had completely lost control of himself in the past few minutes. "What happened to me, fellas?"

Pete enlightened him: "You fell into a pit!"

As Jupiter had rarely been so badly affected, he slowly remembered what had happened. He took off his clothes, examined them for any other critters and put the jeans on the grass to dry. When everything had been checked and cleaned, The Three Investigators looked once more into the pit.

It was almost two metres deep and must have been laid out some time ago so water had collected and critters settled down there. The edges and the bottom were overgrown. The cover construction consisted of brittle branches, which over time had been covered by a network of grass and small bushes, which in turn had contributed to the stability of the cover. But the construction had not been able to withstand the weight of a Jupiter Jones.

They turned from the unsavoury sight and asked why such a pit even existed on the island. Since Jupiter was not yet completely at peace, Bob took on the task of drawing conclusions. That had to be a trapping pit for game. It was an indication that the director had really stayed on the island.

"The trap was not for us, Jupe. It was pure coincidence that it got you," said Bob.

Jupiter had only listened with half an ear, as he carefully put his clothes back on. They stank.

That reminded Pete of something. "Goop-Jupe," Pete teased him. "Goop-Jupe Jones..." Jupiter pulled a face.

"Come on, Goop," Bob said. "Have a laugh!"

"Thank you, Seaweed-Pete," said Goop-Jupe, and the hint of a smile actually ran across his face. "Now all that's left to do is to let something happen to Bob, then he's welcome to the club!"

"Maybe he'll be Waterfall-Bob," Pete said.

"Bungling-Bob."

"How about Crash-Bob?"

"Come on, let's go," Bob said. "I don't find any of this funny."

The Three Investigators laughed and set off. When they had walked a few metres, they realized the danger they were in. Not only by the stranger from the beach, but also the traps were worrying them. Who could know what else the forest was hiding. They resumed their formation and kept some distance apart in case something happened to one of them.

Bob kept walking in front. Slowly it became steeper. They continued on and finally reached the slope behind which they suspected was the waterfall. After a strenuous climb, they reached the ridge, where they took a breather.

"If Dennis Browne is indeed on the island, he is here for one reason only—to find the treasure," Jupiter said. "But apparently he hadn't solved the puzzle as far as we have." He smiled. "Well, there was no Internet back then, otherwise he might have found the solution by entering the names from Franco's letter."

"You think Browne's been searching the whole island?" Pete asked.

"That is to be assumed," Jupe replied. "He turned it upside down, yes—at least all the prominent locations. It'll take years and a good deal of fanaticism."

The small lake lay diagonally below them and attracted them almost magically with its turquoise-blue colour. Surrounded by four hills of approximately the same height, it lay below a second hollow into which the rivulets of two hill slopes converged. They supplied

the narrow waterfall, which poured down a rock face at a height of perhaps ten metres into the oval lake.

“I feel like jumping right in,” said Goop-Jupe.

“Yes, it would do you good,” Bob said with a slight sniffle.

“Me too,” Pete admitted. “Perhaps we could refresh ourselves before a tough job ahead.”

“Why?” asked Jupiter.

“Where shall we look?” Pete said. “We can’t possibly comb through all this rock.”

“I guess we’ll have to search for a while!” Bob moaned.

Jupiter tried to look at it positively. “If everything were that simple, Browne would have found the gold figurines long ago.”

“Maybe he did,” said Pete. “Uh... before we continue on, can we make something to eat first?”

“Yeah, me too,” Jupiter agreed as he was ravenously hungry.

“Where are we gonna go?” Pete asked. “If we go down to the lake, aren’t we really trapped? Our pursuer has us completely in view!”

“You’re right,” Jupiter said. “Even though we didn’t notice anyone on the way here, Mister Unknown might just be sneaking around. Also, he might not be so unknown after all —he could be Dennis Browne!”

Jupiter took a close look at the area. “Do you see that spot there? There, the forest reaches all the way to the shore. If we stay under the trees all the time, we will not be easily spotted.”

Pete nodded. Now that they had the destination in front of them, it was easier. Soon, they had reached the height of the small platform from which the waterfall poured into the lake. They continued their descent but did not leave the forest.

Finally, they reached the spot that Jupiter had pointed out. It was even more favourably situated than they had expected as the place was really hidden. The trees only gave a view of a narrow section of the hills. On the ground, there were newly fallen leaves which covered the forest floor like a blanket. It was so peaceful and quiet. They could hear nothing else except the leaves crunching under their feet and some birds chirping away to each other.

“Okay, this is our resting place—our hideout, so to speak,” he said. “How about you two go get some firewood and I’ll clear the ground for a campfire.”

“Someone will see the smoke,” said Pete.

“If this ‘Ray Liotta’ is really on our heels, he knows where we are anyway. The smoke doesn’t matter,” Jupe replied. “And besides, I’m hungry!”

Bob and Pete went in search for some firewood and it wasn’t hard because a dense forest surrounded them. They chose the driest pieces of wood to keep smoke development within limits.

Pete filled the small kettle up with water to make everyone a warm cup of tea. Bob took the food out of the backpacks and opened some cans of sardine and baked beans. They could feel the heat coming off the fire whilst they sit patiently with their paper plates waiting for the food to be thoroughly cooked. Eventually Jupe dished up everyone’s meals and they got stuck in.

When the fire had burned down a bit and the larger branches were glowing through, Bob took out a bag of marshmallows. A low fire and hot coals provide the best conditions for toasting the sugary treat. They each pierced several marshmallows onto wooden skewers and held them over the fire until the marshmallows were toasted and slightly golden brown.

The Three Investigators really enjoyed it. Finally, after putting out the fire, they let themselves slide to the ground one by one, exhausted.

13. Nerves on the Edge

The whole time it remained quiet—suspicious, or not suspicious at all. The Three Investigators were in the dark about the incidents in the bay.

Jupiter was even ready to tinker with a theory that there was even a logical explanation for the disappearance of the mobile phones. He muttered something about wild cats and rats, but basically he didn't believe it himself. How could a wildcat remove a SIM card? The most likely explanation was that somewhere along the coast, old Browne saw them hanging around and thought they were uninvited guests. He simply wanted to drive them out of his kingdom.

So The Three Investigators soon ventured out of the woods and began to explore the area. The sun was still in the sky, so there was still time. If their assumption was correct, Franco must have hidden the treasure somewhere near the waterfall.

The waterfall was high, but not very powerful. The easiest way to get to it was to walk along the bank. The Three Investigators made their way there cautiously. Soon the splashing of the water falling into the lake overshadowed all other sounds. Most part of the rock surface were covered with moss.

“Maybe there's a little cave behind the waterfall, like in the movie,” Pete said.

Bob cast a sceptical glance at the falling water. The strand was not so wide that it could have covered an entrance to a cave.

“Of course it's a perfect place to hide something behind a waterfall! Let's go check it out,” Jupiter decided.

Between the wall of water and the rock face, there was a narrow gap that one could pass through. One by one, the three of them slipped into the space. As expected, there was no cave there. Instead, there was only a depression in the rock giving sufficient space for the three of them to stand there without getting too wet.

“I wonder if Mister Unknown suspects why we're here,” Jupiter wondered as they came out from behind the waterfall.

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “In any case, if he didn't find what he was looking for here, then there is quite a task waiting for us.”

Bob stretched out his hands and let the water splash on them. “This feels like an adventure pool,” he grinned. “It's a mega-shower.”

Jupiter winked at Pete without Bob noticing. “You're welcome to shower,” he shouted, and as if on command Pete and Jupiter pushed Bob into the lake, laughing.

There was loud clapping and Bob disappeared under the surface of the water, only to reappear shortly afterwards snorting.

“Waterfall-Bob!” joked Pete.

Bob pretended to want to climb on land, but pulled Pete into the water. Pete grabbed Jupiter as he was falling, and now Seaweed-Pete, Goop-Jupe and Waterfall-Bob held a water fight under the waterfall.

It would certainly have continued for a while if Jupiter hadn't suddenly noticed something—a flash of light. It came through between the trees that covered one of the slopes. Inconspicuously he brought himself into a position from which he could see better. Unfortunately, he got a full load of water in his eyes at exactly that moment. “Pete!”

“Yes, Goop?”

Jupiter lowered his voice. “Carry on as if nothing was wrong as we are being watched.”

They splashed back and forth a few more times and pretended nothing was wrong. Then Jupe shouted loudly that he’d had enough now and The Three Investigators sat down on the shore to dry their clothes.

From the corners of his eyes, Jupiter assessed the spot where he had earlier noticed the flash of light. It could have been binoculars in which the sun was reflected. He had seen it two more times. While they carelessly threw a few stones into the lake, The Three Investigators quietly discussed how they could get to the bottom of the matter. They decided to take the risky route.

“I assume that the observer thinks he is undetected. That is our advantage,” Jupe said. “We’ll retreat into the forest and circle it carefully. At least then we will know where we stand... and if it is Dennis Browne, surely the three of us can handle a seventy-year-old man. To be conspicuous, we’ll act as if we were looking for some wood for a fire.”

The Three Investigators stood up and strayed out. Now and then, they bent down to pick up a branch or two. As they did so, they crept nearer and nearer to the forest.

When they had enough privacy, they dropped the wood, stood a few metres apart and moved as quietly as they could up the slope in a line, careful not to step on any branches. It wasn’t easy, because there was a lot of undergrowth and bushes blocking their way again and again. It was an advantage not to be seen, but also a disadvantage because they could be heard by someone and had no overview of the situation themselves.

As they approached the suspected area, they moved more cautiously. Probably the observer had given up his post and was now in turn looking for The Three Investigators. Suddenly they were no longer sure whether their plan had been so good after all. Pete and Bob stopped and looked sceptically at each other. But Jupiter nodded and gave the order to continue.

A branch cracked under Pete’s foot. The wind rustled in the trees. Suddenly they came across a boulder that reached far into the treetops. It was an ideal observation point! But if anyone had been here, there was no trace of him now.

It was scary. They thought they could sense that someone was still there—at least for Pete and Bob.

Jupiter tried to keep himself happy with the thought that the stranger could have made his way to the lake and they had simply walked past each other... or that he was hiding until The Three Investigators went away.

But Jupiter could not prevent the other thought either—maybe the observer was waiting for them somewhere, waiting until they were close enough for him to strike.

Suddenly, a bird flew up. Something rushed through the undergrowth on the ground. Fear made The Three Investigators run towards each other.

“I don’t like this at all,” whispered Pete.

“You’ve got real goose bumps,” said Bob, looking at Pete’s arm.

“You as well!” Pete remarked.

Jupiter decided to go completely around the boulder. He wanted to make sure. Carefully, they crept ahead and looked nervously in front of them.

Suddenly a branch cracked diagonally in front of them, just as if someone had shifted his weight. The Three Investigators looked in that direction and froze. Out of the undergrowth, a black gun was pointed at them. One hand held it, perfectly still. The muzzle was aimed right at Pete.

“Ah, we’d better go,” whispered the Second Investigator. He pretended to be intensely interested in a bush that lay in another direction and abruptly changed course.

Bob and Jupiter did the same. When they thought they were far enough away, they ran and only stopped again when they reached back at their campfire hideout.

Pete’s heart was beating wildly. Only now did he feel the shock. “I want to go back to Rocky Beach,” he puffed. “I want to join the military. I want to go home, even if I have to swim all the way back!”

“Pete! Get a hold of yourself!” Jupiter snapped at him.

Bob put one hand on Pete’s shoulder. “Pete, swimming would be your certain death, and we can’t make our way to the military area today. It will be dark in an hour or two.”

Pete turned away but remained silent.

“Pete! Calm down.” Jupe continued. “The behaviour of our pursuer suggests that he does not want to harm us. At least he is not threatening our lives.”

“Not threatening our lives?” Pete argued. “That’s the second time that guy’s pulled a gun on us!”

Jupiter nodded and raised his hands in appeasement. “Perhaps I have expressed myself wrongly. He threatens, but does not want to harm us—at least not yet, else he would have pulled the trigger long ago.”

“Well, great. You still see a good sign even in the greatest catastrophe!” Pete quipped.

“Not a good sign, Pete, just a sober analysis of his behaviour.” Jupiter explained.

Pete remained silent and breathed in and out a few times. His eyes fell on the paper plates on which they used for their meals earlier. Two wildcats, one large and one small, licked on the leftovers they had left.

“Obviously mother and child,” said Bob, who followed Pete’s gaze and was glad of the distraction.

“Look how the big cat keeps staring at us,” Pete said, “and the little one just licks at the leftovers!”

“Great, then we don’t have to clean them at all!” Bob joked.

Pete laughed softly. “Unfortunately we have other concerns. No seventy-year-old grandpa is following us here! It was that guy who was after Althena!”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “The one who looks like Ray Liotta. That seems obvious, although we don’t know for sure because we haven’t seen him. In any case, the guns look alike. It’s probably the same gun—the one in the photo that Althena took, the one the guy threatened us with, and the gun from just now.”

“And what do you conclude from this?” Pete asked.

“That this guy is after the treasure as well.”

“And he just waits until we find it?” Pete asked.

Jupiter nodded.

“And if we did the dirty work for him, what about your theory of him threatening but not intending to harm us?”

Jupiter let some air hiss through his teeth. “Then it could indeed be close for us,” he admitted.

They were silent. Pete took a look at the cats who were in the meantime sniffing at the backpacks of The Three Investigators. He made his way near them, but very slowly so as not to frighten the cats away. Nevertheless, they jumped back in fear.

Pete grabbed his backpack and took out the cherry pie that Aunt Mathilda had baked especially for this trip. Without Jupiter looking, Pete pinched off a piece and crumbled it onto a paper plate. When he saw the two cats’ ravenous appetite for the unexpected meal, he had

to smile inside himself. He was not going to tell Aunt Mathilda that her celebrated cherry pie was cat food...

While Pete watched the cats, Jupiter was already making new plans with Bob. Pete knew that they could only revolve around one subject—how they would go about finding the treasure.

“...Without our pursuer noticing anything,” Jupiter just said. “There is no other way. We have to do it at night, without flashlights.”

“When the moon is fully up, it could provide us sufficient light,” Bob added.

“What are we going to do?” Pete interrupted them.

“We will creep to the waterfall in the dark and take a closer look around it,” Bob replied.

“If we do find the gold figurines, ‘Ray Liotta’ must not know,” added Jupiter, “otherwise, I don’t know how he will react then.”

“How about we leave the figurines where they are,” Pete said.

“And risk him grabbing it?” Jupiter shook his head vigorously. “No. And besides, Althena would want us to look for the treasure on her behalf.”

“Well, she could not explicitly say that in her letter,” Pete pointed out the facts. “I am more inclined to proceed if it saves her...”

They spent the next half hour on organizational matters. Jupiter looked for a suitable place where they could later lie down in their outdoor sleeping bags. Two bushes seemed to offer him the necessary privacy. Then he helped Bob and Pete put together another reasonably satisfying meal.

The two cats stroked around them all the time. Pete and Bob tried in vain to lure them to their laps. Jupiter ignored the animals completely, got up again and again to mumble and look at the waterfall. When he came back from one of his little outings and sat down with his friends, the larger of the two cats jumped up and snuggled onto his lap. Bob and Pete were stunned.

“That’s the thanks we get for feeding you,” Pete started. “With Jupe, you would have starved mercilessly!”

“That’s why I like cats,” said the First Investigator succinctly. “They know who the boss is...” A bit awkwardly, he started to scratch the animal.

Bob and Pete shook their heads in anger. A while later, they were also rewarded with a visit from the cats. The mother was taken on Pete’s lap and the little one went to Bob. The cats purred comfortably.

But the cat’s visit did not last long. Completely surprisingly, something was booming in the air and the cats ran away like lightning. It was the noise from a helicopter flying quite low! The noise quickly became louder. It was the chance to get help! Jupiter jumped up, ran out of the woods and wildly waved his T-shirt. But shortly afterwards, the helicopter disappeared above the tree tops.

“Hopefully someone saw us,” Bob said and stared up at the sky for a longer moment. But the helicopter did not return. Disappointed, they went back into the woods. At least after a while, the cats came back and The Three Investigators gave them some more pie crumbs.

The sun was slowly moving towards the hem of the ridges when Jupiter suddenly struck his forehead with his hand. The cats startled up.

“Dennis Browne couldn’t swim,” the First Investigator cried out. With excitement, Jupiter had trouble keeping his voice down. “Dennis Browne could not swim! Bob, it was in the article from the Internet!”

“So what?” said Pete. “I know some people who can’t swim...” He interrupted himself and looked at Jupiter. “Now I understand what you’re getting at! Browne searched the whole

island... but not the lake! He couldn't check the lake!"

14. Secret in the Depths

Jupiter nodded. There was one place on the island that Dennis Browne had not been able to search properly.

“Even if he had come up with the idea that the treasure might be hidden in the lake, as a non-swimmer he would hardly have examined it sufficiently. That gives us an advantage. You must take a bath, Pete!”

“Why me?”

“Of us, it is you who can dive the best... and the longest. You have to get in somewhere hidden and you are not allowed to take a breath until you get back.”

“Or else that lunatic will blow my head off or what?” Pete argued.

“Not right away, but—”

“Oh, great.” Pete looked at the lake to the other bank. “This lake is so big so where do I start? After all, I’m not a submarine.”

“Start with the waterfall,” said Jupiter. “If Franco’s reference to Carlos and Ronaldo is a clue, then it has to be near this waterfall. Between the waterfall and the rock face, you can catch your breath unseen.”

Pete looked at the waterfall. “And what should I be looking for?”

“I do not know,” Jupe said. “If Franco was in a hurry, maybe he packed the gold figurines in a waterproof container and simply sank them. I suspect he already knew the island. Maybe he already knew a good hiding place. I don’t know, Pete, we just have to start somewhere! It’s still bright enough now.”

Pete looked at the waterfall again. The fact that the sun was no longer central, but almost opposite, was an advantage. The sky was reflected on the surface, and from the perspective from the forest, one would not be able to see what was going on under the water.

Pete hoped that ‘Ray Liotta’ had just such a perspective. The guy was probably stuck in the woods, waiting for them. Anyway, the opposite slopes were grassy, and there was clearly nobody there.

“I don’t think that our pursuer is watching us now,” said Jupiter. “This place is not visible enough for that. In any case, we have to be cautious. I’ll keep him busy a little by going for a little walk along the shore. Bob, will you come with me?”

“Still better than staying here alone and letting that guy catch me,” Bob said. “Then I wish you good luck, Pete!”

The three of them were trained scuba divers, but Pete was the most experienced of them. However, he was not a fan of free diving, and that meant diving without the use of breathing apparatus, particularly in deep waters. It was extreme and very dangerous. A free diver would take one very deep breath and dive deep under the water without any scuba gear. It took training, practise and discipline.

Pete got his diving goggles out of his backpack and waited until his friends were gone. Then he took a deep breath and slid into the water. He decided to limit his dive to a maximum of five metres, and he also knew that he could hold his breath for about three minutes.

It was clear and pleasant. Pete immediately dived to a depth of about two metres so that he would not create waves at the surface. With big and powerful strokes, he headed for the

spot where the waterfall had to be. His air was still fine. The lake got deeper, but Pete could still see the bottom. It was overgrown with low plants, with rocks rolled down between them. A few fish were scurrying away. By the time he got to about five metres, the bottom sank to a depth where he could no longer see it. Near the waterfall was apparently the deepest part of the lake.

Pete wasn't quite sure whether he had maintained the right course. It flashed through his mind how in a previous case, even when he had scuba diving gear on, he was trapped in a sunken boat and was almost drowned until an adversary saved him. He swallowed. Such thoughts always had to come at the most inappropriate moments! The need to surface grew stronger.

Suddenly, Pete heard something—a steady, dull rumble. He changed direction and looked around. There was nothing except for swirls of water and threads of bubbles. He picked up the pace once more. The water became colder. He clenched his mouth, pushed the water behind him and swam back up.

“Ahhh...” Take a breath first! The dive had been longer than he had thought. Carefully he drifted to the side to look past the waterfall. There was no sign of ‘Ray Liotta’ or whatever his name was. Instead, he saw Jupiter and Bob lounging around a distance away. They turned over a few stones as if they were looking for something.

Pete took a deep breath and went under again. When his ears began to hurt, he held his nose to be able to equalize the pressure. Quickly, he was at two or three metres. He went further down, and there was still nothing to see. It became eerie for Pete. He did not know what was there. After another three minutes, he decided to go back to the surface. Behind the waterfall, he took several deep breaths—long and regular ones.

Diving shallow and far was no problem, but going to an unknown depth caused him anxiety. There was something threatening about it.

“All right, one more time,” he said to himself.

He gathered all his courage and went down again. The rock fell away steeply. Pete pulled himself down by it. Three metres, four metres, five metres... It got darker and darker the deeper he got. A rocky ledge appeared dimly in the depths.

Pete felt a choking sensation. His ears hurt so he pressed against them, as he commanded himself to proceed on. He came closer to his target and grabbed the edge of the rock with his right hand. To get a better grip, he used his other hand to reach behind the rock. As he did so, he touched something strange and Pete's hand jerked back as if electrified. Was it a branch? It was something bony.

Something bony? Fear rose in him. The view was dim, and he couldn't hold his breath much longer. But Pete wanted to know, so he pulled himself down the ledge and risked a look into the depths.

At that moment, his stomach turned. Pete had not expected this. He stared directly into the eye sockets of a skull!

Panicked, Pete let go of the rock and shot up through the water. It was far. When did the surface finally come? The path seemed endless to him. Stomach, lungs, nothing worked as it should. He expelled air, swallowed water. It became brighter. It had to be a few more strokes. At last, he was up, snorting and flailing around.

Pete spat out and looked around. He was several metres from the waterfall. He swam to the bank and pulled himself ashore, breathing heavily, calming down as best as he could. There was a skeleton—a dead man in about five metres depth under water! What was the meaning of this?

Jupiter and Bob looked over at him, but he couldn't read their expressions at that distance. It didn't matter anyway.

Pete thought about the skull. Down there, it could only be the skeleton of Dennis Browne. Who else? Browne hadn't been able to swim, but the addiction to the treasure had somehow driven him down. In his delusion, he had gone too far, stuck to the rock and died in an accident. Had he found the entrance to the treasure cave on this last attempt?

Pete almost hoped that he hadn't. He knew what it meant, and he did not want to go down there another time. Besides, he had had enough of diving for the time being. He got up and staggered along the shore.

Jupiter and Bob approached him from the other bank and a little later, they met at their campfire hideout.

"What did you see?" Jupiter asked. Both he and Bob couldn't wait. "Tell us! You look totally pale!"

Still trembling with fear, Pete told what he had encountered. Jupiter and Bob listened intently. Finally Jupiter drew exactly the same conclusion as Pete.

"It's no use," said Jupiter. "We have to examine the area carefully if we want to find the treasure. But neither Bob nor I are able to dive to such depths. I'm afraid you have to go down again."

"No. Not today. I can't make it. Besides, it's getting dark."

"Then tomorrow, when the sun rises. Pete, we will of course support you with everything we have at our disposal. The first thing you should do is get your strength back." To prove this, Jupiter took his favourite biscuits from his backpack and handed them to Pete.

Pete knew that Jupiter did not find this easy, but what the First Investigator had asked him to do was dangerous. "I want your muesli bars too!" Pete said. "Both of them."

With a somewhat more morose expression, Jupiter handed his last bars to Pete. Pete ate them on the spot. "And now, the rest of the cherry pie!"

Jupiter cleared his throat. "Is this necessary?"

"I just can't do it without them."

Reluctantly, Jupiter pushed the so well-protected cherry pie in Pete's direction.

Suddenly the two cats were back. Under Jupiter's horrified eyes, Pete pinched off a small piece of the pie for each of them. Then he gobbled up a large share for himself and kept the remainder.

"If the cats are doing well, I'm doing well too," explained Pete, who was slowly getting in a better mood. "And now, Bob, I want your bottle of freshly squeezed orange juice."

"But there's only half of it left," protested Bob.

"Give it to me!"

"Do it, Bob!" Jupiter said threateningly.

Bob gave the bottle to Pete, and Pete drank it all.

"Okay," he said, "if I can sleep the night off without keeping watch, then I'll do the job!"

"Bummer," Jupiter mumbled.

That was the deal. They stared a while into the landscape and watched the cats. While the little one was romping around exuberantly in some bushes, the mother quietly moved around here and there.

15. Jupiter Shows Courage

A while later, the sun had disappeared behind the ridge of the hills, and it would soon get dark. Pete went to look for the cats to give them a little dessert—the last remains of Aunt Mathilda's cherry pie. A bit further along the edge of the woods, he found the little one jumping after a grasshopper, but where was the big one?

Pete noticed something moving in the grass nearby, and he approached carefully. It was the mother cat. Her head was lowered as she must have caught something. When she sensed Pete coming, she turned to look at him. He came closer and saw something shining between her front legs. Pete stepped in front of her, and the cat stepped aside a bit without letting him out of her sight. There was something lying in the grass. Pete bent down. It was an elephant—a little gold elephant!

“Cat, you’re brilliant!” whispered Pete. He grabbed the figurine, ran back quickly and showed it to Jupiter and Bob. The two of them were amazed at the discovery of that little figurine. Then it gushed out of them:

“The treasure is really here!”

“Maybe just the elephant?”

“Is everything scattered about?”

“Franco must have distributed the figurines around!”

“The cat found the hiding place!”

“Maybe the others are there too!”

“Why is the cat interested in a gold figurine?”

“Maybe she is attracted to shiny objects, Bob,” Jupiter suspected. “But where did she find the elephant?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Pete, and he added triumphantly: “But certainly not five metres under water! Cats are especially known to be afraid of water...”

Bob suddenly realized what this meant. “I want my orange juice back,” he shouted indignantly.

“I’ll buy you a Coke when we get back to Rocky Beach,” Pete grinned and turned to Jupiter. “And you’ll get a fat, old sausage!”

“And Pete Crenshaw keeps guard all night!” Jupiter countered. But something else interested him a thousand times more now. “Remember, Pete... Where could the cat have found the figurine? The waterfall is too far away. The best thing is to show us the place where you picked up the elephant!”

Pete remembered the place exactly. They walked a few metres there. “Here!” he said, pointing to the spot in the grass.

The lake shore was a good fifteen metres away. On the other side of the field was the edge of the forest. They looked around and discovered nothing but bushes and boulders nearby.

“Are we going to examine them all?” Bob asked.

“There is no other choice,” Jupe decided.

Bob frowned doubtfully. “In the end we’ll end up like old Dennis—as madmen on a treasure island... who die in a miserable accident!”

“Besides, it’s getting dark,” Pete remarked.

Jupiter pointed to the flashlight that was in his belt. “If ‘Ray Liotta’ turns up now and sees us with this figurine, he’ll get the rest himself. There won’t be anything else for us to do. So we have to find the rest before he does. And we’ve got to do it fast...”

Bob took the flashlight and lit the bushes. Some plants looked familiar to him. They grew in countless places on the island. Suddenly, the cone of light caught a tree with golden-yellow flowers hanging down from the branches. He thought for a while and then burst out: “Hey!”

“What’s the matter, Bob?” Jupe asked.

Bob stepped from one foot to the other as if he had to go to the toilet. “Franco studied botany,” he whispered. “Mrs Livingston mentioned it.”

“What do you mean?” Jupe continued.

“That tree there...” Bob shone a light at the tree with the golden-yellow flowers. “I think that tree doesn’t normally grow in this region. If I’m not mistaken, that’s a... laburnum! It’s a tree native to southern Europe, not here, unless it was planted with intention.”

“Laburnum? Golden chain?” Then Jupiter understood. “Why yes, Bob! Franco understands botany! We haven’t paid enough attention to that yet. This fact may have indeed played a role in his choice of a hiding place,” Jupiter exclaimed.

Laburnum... That was brilliant! What better hiding place for a gold treasure could there be than to indicate it with a tree commonly known as ‘golden chain’? Did Mrs Livingston’s brother not only have the treasure in his luggage at the time, but also a young plant?

“Shine on,” Jupiter commanded. “Just go a few metres away from us and pretend you’re trying to track down ‘Ray Liotta’. Pete and I will go back to the backpacks and grab some knives.”

Bob shone through the trees, but he hardly looked at all. Excited, he wondered whether they would be able to recover all the gold figurines. The tension mixed with the fear of meeting their pursuer. Was Jupiter really right in his haste? Or was it a greater risk to search for the figurines now?

He saw his friends come back. Bob lit up a treetop as a distraction. In the dark, Jupiter and Pete crawled under the bush. Bob kept watch for a while longer and then he proceeded to join in the search.

The cat, the real discoverer of the treasure, stroked around the three of them meowing and probably wondered why these large human creatures suddenly crawled so clumsily around on the ground on all fours.

Pete cursed softly to himself. It was really no fun digging holes with a pocket knife. Luckily he had put on his T-shirt. Nevertheless, stones scratched his knees, twigs poked at his face, and at any moment, he expected a rat to bite his finger. To make matters worse, Bob had mentioned that all parts of the tree were poisonous—the bark, roots, leaves and especially the seed pods—so they had to make sure that nothing went into their mouths.

They had to search for a long time. But suddenly Pete felt something smooth and cool under his fingers. He pulled it out and briefly lit it with the weak mini-lamp of his pocket knife.

“A monkey,” he whispered to Jupiter who looked over at him. “We are on the right track!”

Bob could hardly hide his excitement. With renewed vigour, they dug between the roots and suddenly they had them all—lions, dogs, cats, giraffes... and the second elephant. Finally, they found all twenty-three pairs!

“Wow! I just can’t believe it,” Pete silently cheered.

Jupiter apparently didn't switch off his brain even in such moments of happiness. "Franco must have put the gold figurines in cloth or a blanket, which disintegrated over time," the First Investigator speculated. "That is why the treasure was simply stuck between the roots... Anyway, before we do anything, I'll take a photo of the figurines with Althena's camera in case we need it later," he decided and took Althena's camera out of his pocket.

Bob and Pete arranged the figurines on the ground and Jupiter took two photos. Then he set it to playback to check. He also took a look at the date and time embedded in each of the two photos. "7:23 pm... Wait a minute... the date is wrong. The camera clock is one day behind!" He laughed. "I didn't notice that before! But now we better put the treasure in this bag."

From the camping bag that they brought along, Pete brought out a blanket and carefully rolled the figurines into it. It became a really heavy bundle. Jupiter then put the bundle back into the bag.

"Let's quickly go back to our hideout," he whispered.

Just as they were moving off, the light from Bob's flashlight went out. It had become so dark that they could not see exactly what was going on. The moon had not yet reached the height of the mountain ridge. Suddenly, they heard a dull thud.

"Go and see what's going on," hissed Jupiter. "I'll follow you."

Pete wanted to reply, but swallowed his remark. He had remembered the direction from which Bob's flashlight had shone. He toddled off, got caught in branches and had to free himself first. Then he breathed out and continued to creep. It was obviously darker under the trees than in the field.

Suddenly, something moved in front of Pete. A dark shadow rose from the darkness and pounced on him. A scream died in the throat of the Second Investigator.

"Pete! Is that you?"

It took Pete a few seconds before he understood. "Bob?"

"Yeah, I was terrified and I tripped over a branch!"

"Not 'Ray Liotta'?" Pete asked.

"Not 'Ray Liotta'!" Bob confirmed.

"I'm so glad!" Pete whispered. "And Jupe? Where are you?" Was Jupiter still behind him?

"Jupe?" No answer. Fear crept up on Pete. "Jupe?" He heard the wind in the trees, branches cracking in several places.

"I'm here, Pete," he suddenly heard the First Investigator hiss.

Pete turned around and Jupiter stepped towards him from the darkness.

"Where is the bag?" Pete asked.

"It's with me," Jupiter said. "We have to quickly get out of here to somewhere safe."

"No! Not so fast, you three toads!" The voice was incisive. A beam of light flashed up. Blinded, The Three Investigators closed their eyes for a moment.

"Give me the figurines!" the voice demanded.

They were trapped! Pete and Bob had their hearts in their mouths.

Only Jupiter remained cool. "No," he said.

The man let the light fall on his other hand, holding the black gun they already knew. Some light also fell on his face. His eyes had narrowed into slits. "You don't have much of a choice, fatso!" He pointed the gun at Jupiter. "Give me the figurines."

"Unfortunately we cannot give you the treasure," Jupiter replied majestically. As he continued speaking, Bob and Pete took their breaths away for a moment.

“We just wanted to set a trap for you, so that you would finally show yourself to us,” Jupiter continued unmoved. “We knew that you have been watching us all the time! In any case, I must disappoint you—we have no treasure. All we can offer you are a few dirty stones!”

“Don’t get smart with me, fatso!” ‘Ray Liotta’ said. “Let’s see what you got in that bag.”

Jupiter put down the bag and slowly took out the bundle. He cleared his throat and made his voice sound a bit more fearful. “The gun...” he said. “I don’t want anything to go wrong and you shoot by mistake! I’ll put the bundle here on the ground for you and we’ll take a few steps back, so you won’t think that the three of us are going to attack you or run away. You certainly do not need to be afraid of us so please put the gun away.”

“I’m warning you, kid,” ‘Ray Liotta’ growled. “I give the orders here.”

Jupiter slowly put the bundle on the ground, grabbed back the camping bag and looked up. “Release our friend Althena and we can talk about everything.” He backed away a little. Pete and Bob did the same.

“Stand right there and don’t move!” The man walked towards the bundle and bent down.

At that exact moment, Jupiter hissed: “Ramble and scramble!” and The Three Investigators took off. They ran in different directions through the bushes, fell down, picked themselves up again, but they were so fast that ‘Ray Liotta’ had no chance of catching them. Who would he have chosen to follow?

After a while, The Three Investigators met back at their campfire hideout. The last to arrive was Jupiter.

“Why did you just give ‘Ray Liotta’ the figurines?” Bob whispered curiously.

“... Not the figurines but stones! The treasure is here!” Jupiter placed the camping bag on the ground. “Earlier when the two of you went ahead, stumbling over each other, I took the precaution of replacing the figurines with the stones in that bundle.”

“And instead, you put the figurines into this camping bag. Great work!” Pete commented.

Jupiter nodded and added: “... And just in time as well, just before ‘Ray Liotta’ turned up.”

“But it’s only a matter of time before he finds us!” Pete exclaimed.

“Our helicopter won’t be here for three days,” Bob moaned. “What are we going to do until then?”

“If we hide the treasure,” Pete continued, “that guy will grab one of us and force it out of us.”

“Somehow we have to get his gun,” Jupiter said. “‘Liotta’ must sleep sometime!”

Doubtfully Pete shook his head. “It’s too dangerous. We might walk right into a trap.”

“How about going to the military area?” Bob said and bent down to feel the figurines in the bag.

“But we’ll need to walk a long distance to get there, not to say that it would be easy for us to get near the restricted area...” Pete said.

“I don’t know,” said Jupiter. “Maybe ‘Liotta’ will accept the deal—treasure for Althena. He probably has her captured. What do you think?”

“Why would he go for it?” Bob asked.

“Because then he’ll have what he wants,” Jupe reasoned. “But I don’t know where he’s keeping Althena. Anyway, I think the best thing we can do is to get out of here. Once we’re out in the open, ‘Liotta’ will have a much harder time tracking us down.”

Pete and Bob had no objection to this.

But Jupiter still hesitated. “It could be a mistake to take the figurines with us, but to leave them here is also no way!” he said and paused. “Wait a minute, I have an idea.”

“What are we gonna do?” Bob asked.

“We’ll hide the figurines,” Jupe decided.

Under the surprised looks of Pete and Bob, Jupe pulled a roll of rope from the bag. Then he asked Bob and Pete to place the figurines back into the same bag. Jupe tied one end of the rope carefully around the bag handles and signalled to his friends to follow him. They crept out of the woods and cautiously headed to the waterfall. On reaching there, they went behind it into the small space between the strand of water and the rock face. Here behind the waterfall, they didn’t have to be afraid of being overheard.

Jupiter unravelled about four metres of the rope and tied the other end of it around a steady rock. Then he slowly let the bag into the water. When the rope was taut on the ground, he used his pocket knife to dig a little trench underneath the rope. Then he placed the taut rope into the trench and covered it with earth until the rope was no longer visible. Bob placed some leaves and branches over the part of the rope tied to the rock.

“Great job,” Pete remarked.

“So, Dennis Browne, at least you now get to see the treasure!” Jupe remarked. “The figurines can be our insurance... As long as ‘Liotta’ doesn’t have them, he needs us!”

16. Surprise at Night

When Jupiter was satisfied with his work, The Three Investigators set out on their ascent. Above them, the starry sky glittered and gave a breath of light. There was nothing to be seen of the moon and they did not dare to use a flashlight.

To the plateau, from which the water fell, there was only a good ten metres difference in altitude, but they had to make a diversion over the slope. After a few minutes, The Three Investigators had almost reached the spot. They stopped and stared into the darkness.

“‘Liotta’ is hiding somewhere around here,” said Pete. “I can literally feel him!”

Suddenly an object flew towards them and bounced between them.

“What was that?” Pete cried and stepped aside.

A second object hit Bob in the leg. “Ouch!”

Something rolled away and it sounded like a stone.

“He’s throwing something at us!” Bob said.

As quickly as they could, The Three Investigators backed off. More stones followed.

They found shelter behind a boulder. Suddenly, a flashlight turned on and caught the boulder in its cone of light. Jupiter had the courage to shine back. The man they called ‘Ray Liotta’ stood on the plateau like a commander. Again something flew up and crashed into the boulder.

“I’ll let you have your stones back, you rascals!” cried ‘Liotta’. “If you don’t hand over the figurines right now, I’ll be happy to shoot some lead at you!”

Jupiter looked around. They were reasonably safe behind the boulder. “We want Althena!” he called out.

“You’re not exactly in a position to negotiate, fatso!” ‘Liotta’ yelled.

For a moment, nothing happened. Because of the sound of the waterfall, The Three Investigators could not even hear if ‘Liotta’ had moved.

“What if he surprises us from behind?” Bob asked. “Then we are at his mercy!”

“He’s going to shoot us, Jupe!” Pete gasped and gave the First Investigator a nudge. “Let’s give him the stuff.”

“Not so fast, Pete.” Jupiter crawled on the ground until he found a long branch. He broke off a few branches and tied the flashlight crosswise to one end. Then he turned the flashlight on and held the branch over the boulder. The cone of light shone across the slope and suddenly caught ‘Liotta’ very briefly, who in the meantime had made his way towards them. A shot whizzed, and a bullet hit somewhere next to the flashlight. Startled, Jupiter repositioned his construction.

“Further left!” he said. “We must move to the left!”

Staying in a squatting position, they jerked sideways. A branch broke.

“Not so loud, Pete,” Jupiter whispered.

“That wasn’t me!”

“Who else?”

“It wasn’t me!” Pete repeated in a trembling voice. “It was behind me! It could not be ‘Liotta’. He is still too far away.”

“Someone else?” Bob asked and swallowed.

They heard hissing and breathing sounds. It had to be very close... and big. The blood in the veins of The Three Investigators froze.

The boys felt the branches of a bush being pushed apart behind them. Pete did not dare look, Bob risked a wink. But Jupiter turned around in a sudden. He stared into the middle of huge green insect eyes! Jupe clawed his fingers into the boulder in shock.

“Shh...” said the monster. Hands rose up and pulled at the green eyes. Against the night sky, the outline of a face suddenly appeared. “Shh... I’ve come to help you!”

“Who... who... who are you?” Jupiter stuttered.

“Max Stevens, Elvira Zuckerman’s assistant.”

“Max?” That was Pete. “Whew! What a relief! Then you were in the helicopter that flew over us earlier! Why are you here?”

“We have tried to reach you several times but could not get through. We were worried, so Elvira sent me.”

“Our mobile phones were stolen and now that guy there wants us by the scruff of the neck,” Bob whispered. “But now you’re in the middle of it.”

As if to underline Bob’s last sentence, ‘Liotta’ fired another bullet. It whizzed over the boulder.

“I’ve already been watching this man!” said Max.

“How?” asked Bob.

“With my night vision glasses. I’d better put it back on.” Max slipped on the gear that startled Jupiter earlier and peered around the boulder. “He’s standing next to a tree... about twenty metres away,” she whispered. “From there, he can’t see you yet.”

“Hey! You rascals!” cried ‘Liotta’. “Come out with your hands up!”

Jupiter pushed past Bob so that he could sit next to Max. “Why are you so well-equipped, Max?”

Max crawled back a little. “I have much more with me! My real job is a whole different one, but I’m not sure if I should tell you.”

“So your assistant work is just a cover?” Jupiter asked.

“Hey, fatso!” ‘Liotta’ yelled impatiently in between. “Have you shut your big mouth?”

“Yes, Jupiter, I’m an undercover agent,” Max said without being disturbed by ‘Liotta’s’ outbursts. “Anyway, you’ll find out sooner or later. I am an agent of the insurance company. We’re currently onto the case of the stolen gold figurines. But if my hunch is correct, I’m not the only one interested.”

‘Liotta’ became more impatient. “Are you playing dead? Very well! If you’re not coming out, then I’ll come and get you.”

Max murmured softly: “Well, do it then!” Then she said to Jupiter. “That guy over there got wind of the treasure—from somewhere... and apparently you too!”

“That’s right,” Jupe said. “That guy we called ‘Ray Liotta’ abducted a friend of ours. We want to help her and we came across the treasure trail.”

“And we even found it!” Pete triumphed.

“Wow! Wonderful!” Max said in amazement. “That’s what I call a sensational achievement!”

“Jupe fooled ‘Liotta’ and we hid the treasure,” Pete explained.

“Well then, let’s see that it ends well,” Max said and peeked around the corner of the boulder. “A handsome reward will surely jump out for you... but only when we have sorted out the situation here. Watch out, he’s coming closer!”

Max retreated a little. “He doesn’t know that I am here. That is our advantage. But if I just stand up to him, I don’t stand a chance. I have to surprise him from behind. Talk to him,

but leave the figurines to him if things get dangerous. Under no circumstances must anything happen to you.”

She wanted to withdraw, but Jupiter held her by the sleeve. “Wait, Max,” he said. “Yes. I’ll talk to him. And on the cue ‘cat’... I’ll blind him with the flash of my camera. That’s when you strike.”

“This is too dangerous, Jupiter!” Max said.

“It will work,” said the First Investigator. “I’m sure it will!”

“‘Liotta’ is coming,” Max whispered. “Okay, let’s try it your way. I’ll go now!”

Max slipped into the darkness.

17. The Game is Up

It was just in time.

“Hey, where are you?” The Three Investigators heard ‘Liotta’ yell out. “Come out with the gold!”

Again a shot whizzed through the air and hit the boulder a few metres above them. Sand trickled down on The Three Investigators. ‘Liotta’ switched on his flashlight and searched the edge of the boulder.

“Ah!” he said with satisfaction. “There you are. Stop fooling with me!”

Jupiter stood up. He had tucked Althena’s camera into his belt at his back. “The treasure is still hidden, mister!”

“Oh! Hidden is it?” ‘Liotta’ remarked. “Should I kill one of you before you tell me where?”

“I wouldn’t do that, sir. You might get the wrong one.”

“Why?”

“Because only one of us knows where the treasure is. The other two have no idea!”

“That can only be you, fatso!”

“Are you sure about this?” Jupiter stood in the glow of ‘Liotta’s’ flashlight and put on a cool grin. “We drew lots. You can’t kill any of us, mister! It could be the wrong guy!”

“You’re real rats!” ‘Liotta’ moaned. “Why must this happen to me of all people? You know what, I’ll make it short anyway!” He wanted to take a step towards Jupiter.

“Wait!” cried Jupiter. He hoped that Max had had enough time.

‘Liotta’ paused. “What is it?”

Behind his back, Jupiter turned on the camera. “There is another confidant who knows the hiding place of the treasure,” he shouted, pulled out the camera and cried: “It’s a cat!”

Instantly, Jupe pulled out the camera and clicked on it to flash twice. The Three Investigators saw dimly how Max suddenly found herself at ‘Liotta’s’ side, knocking the gun out of his hand with a branch, only to ram her own gun into his side with the other hand at the same time.

Bob switched on his flashlight. Now they saw the insurance investigator fully. She was dressed completely dark and wore black gloves. The night vision device had slipped off her head. She forced ‘Liotta’ to place his hands behind his head. Then she carefully led him to The Three Investigators.

Right in front of Jupiter, ‘Liotta’ spat out. Max had also got hold of ‘Liotta’s’ gun and pushed it into the hand of the nearest person, which was Pete. “Can you handle it?”

“Yes,” Pete lied. The Three Investigators hated guns and generally preferred to use their brains.

“Beware! The safety catch is off.” Max positioned ‘Liotta’ at the boulder face. “Keep him at bay, Pete, I’ll search him.”

She checked ‘Liotta’ but found no other weapon. Instead, she pulled his wallet out of his jacket and took out his driver’s licence. “Ah, Mr Ronny Shep! So that’s ‘Liotta’s’ real name! Treasure hunting may not be your thing, Mr Shep... instead, I heard that you issued threats, used violence and engaged in abduction...”

“Who are you, anyway?” asked Shep. “A secret agent from outer space?”

“Max Stevens,” Max said. “I solve crimes where the police have got nowhere. I work for a reputable insurance company. Is that enough?”

“Of course it’s enough!” ‘Liotta’ said. “I’m fed up with all this! I’ve had it up to here!”

“Okay then,” Jupiter said. “To be on the safe side, Bob, could you get a piece of rope and tie up Mr ‘Liotta’s’ hands.”

“My name is not ‘Liotta’!” Shep exclaimed.

“We will continue to call you ‘Liotta’ for simplicity’s sake,” Jupe insisted.

As Bob was tying ‘Liotta’s’ hands behind his back, Jupe continued to ask: “Where is Althena?”

“Your fine friend unfortunately got in the way. I have locked her in the galley of the pirate ship.”

“Then there is also attempted murder,” said Jupiter. “After all, you set the ship on fire!”

“I only took her there later,” ‘Liotta’ replied. “Before that, she was lying tied up on my boat.”

Max stepped forward. “Let’s work out the details later,” she said. “I want to turn Shep in to the police as soon as possible. We still have some work to do. We’ll recover the figurines, make our way to the helicopter and fly to the pirate ship to free Althena. From there, we will go directly to the police!”

“I suggest Inspector Cotta from Rocky Beach,” said Jupiter. “We often work with him.”

“That’s fine.” Max waved her gun. “So, now we have to get the treasure. Where is it?”

“I’ll show you,” said Jupiter. “Follow me.”

Together they descended the slope. Jupiter first, then ‘Liotta’, Max, Pete and Bob. After a few minutes, they gathered on the bank near the waterfall.

“We have to get behind the waterfall,” he said. “It is very narrow there. I suggest that Pete and Bob stay out here with ‘Liotta’. Max and I will go in to retrieve it.”

Max nodded. “Good idea. Let’s go.”

When Jupiter came to the place where he had sunk the bag, he stopped. Then he dug out the rope from the ground. “Here it is. The figurines hang securely on a rope down below about four metres under water. Do you want to pull it up, Max?”

She nodded. “With pleasure. I have worked long and hard for this moment. It will be my biggest success as an insurance investigator yet!”

“Please be careful,” said Jupiter. “Hand me your gun, Max.”

Max handed Jupiter the gun and began to pull on the rope. The figurines were heavy, and she began to pull it up slowly.

Jupiter focussed on her sharply. “Max, do you always wear gloves when you hold a gun in your hand?” he asked.

“Yes, I prefer that. Why?”

“Careful,” said Jupiter. “Pull slowly... otherwise the bag handle might break!”

Max continued to pull the rope, but suddenly, it happened. The rope broke and caused Max to fall backwards on the ground. The bag containing the figurines sunk down to the depths!

At the same time, ‘Liotta’s’ wallet, which Max had inserted into her back pocket fell out. Jupiter shone his flashlight at it. He quickly bent down, picked up the wallet and took ‘Liotta’s’ driver’s licence out. He took a quick look at it and, with a satisfied smile on his lips, put it in his pocket.

Max flinched and started to stand up.

“Hands up, Max!” Jupiter calmly said and pointed the gun at the insurance investigator.

Max straightened up, her legs trembled. “What’s this... what are you doing?” she stammered.

Jupiter took a step back to get the situation better under control. “When I noticed that you have a black glove on while holding your gun, I became suspicious,” Jupiter said. “You know that Althena took some photos in your office. In one of the photos, there was a mirror behind the table and it showed a gun held by one hand in a glove. That was you, when you surprised her in the process. But we thought you had an alibi for the time of the incident—at least so because the date on Althena’s camera was a day behind.”

“What are you talking about?” Max exclaimed.

“Stop acting, Max,” Jupe continued. “And then there’s this...” Jupiter pulled out ‘Liotta’s’ driver’s licence. “You didn’t read us ‘Liotta’s’ real name, which is Michael Coque. That tells me that you are in cahoots with him.”

Max stared at Jupiter without saying a word.

“Your game is up, Max,” Jupe concluded. “Put your hands up and walk slowly out of here. I’d like you to know that I know how to use a gun.” He lied, of course.

18. “The Cats Helped”

When Max walked out from behind the waterfall with her hands up, followed by Jupiter with the gun in his hand, Pete exclaimed: “Jupe! What happened? You’ve got the figurines?”

“Nope,” Jupe said. “The bag broke off and the treasure has sunk down, but that’s not important now. Max is in cahoots with ‘Liotta’.”

“What?” Pete and Bob exclaimed at the same time.

“Yes,” Jupiter continued. “Before I continue, Bob, get the rest of the rope and tie up Miss Stevens’s hands as well.”

Bob did as instructed while Jupe quickly explained how the black glove that Max wore gave her away, and also how she concealed ‘Liotta’s’ real name.

“The wrong date on Althena’s camera also threw us off,” Jupe continued. “We thought she took the photos on the day Max went to the actor casting with Miss Zuckerman. Now we know that it was the next day when Max caught her.”

Then Jupiter turned to ‘Liotta’. “And, almost logically, Max didn’t read us your real name on your driver’s licence. She wanted to protect you, so you must be her friend. The two of you pulled off the act cleverly! … Now, before we continue, Mr ‘Liotta’, may we have your mobile phone, please?”

“Mobile phone?” ‘Liotta’ asked. “Why?”

“Our mobile phones have disappeared somehow, so we need yours,” Jupiter said smugly. “Bob, please go get his phone!”

Bob slid past behind Pete and pulled ‘Liotta’s’ mobile out of his jacket. “Got it!”

“Contact Inspector Cotta,” said Jupiter. “I believe he should be at home by now.”

Bob knew the number by heart and pressed the appropriate keys. After the third ring, the inspector picked up.

“Hello Inspector Cotta! This is Bob Andrews of The Three Investigators,” Bob said, and he briefly described how they had captured a pair of crooks, solved an age-old theft of a treasure, and recovered the items. “We would be grateful if you could arrange to send a police helicopter… Yes, goodbye, Inspector.”

“So?” asked Jupiter. “How did he react?”

“I took him away from a TV thriller,” Bob said. “But he’s used to getting this from us!”

“Your Cotta seems to be a real super cop,” ‘Liotta’ growled.

“He is just doing his job,” Bob replied. “And mostly he does it very well because we support him from time to time.”

“This is yet another case to add to it,” Jupiter boasted as he stroked his hair to concentrate. “By the way, I would like to know how you got on the trail of the gold figurines.”

‘Liotta’ spat out. “I’m not here on a quiz show, fatso!”

“Never mind, Michael,” said Max. She had given up. “It was me who came across the story. The more I studied Dennis Browne, the more I became interested in his disappearance. I have access to the documents and notes on Browne’s planned project—the movie of Franco’s life. And from there, I discovered the copy of Franco’s letter. I only had to put one

and one together to know that Browne was after the gold figurines... and that the treasure had to be here on San Clemente Island."

"So the letter was not missing from your office when we were with you," Jupiter thought. "You had it all the time."

"Yes."

"And the story of the man who called you saying that he was Browne's nephew?"

"Pure invention."

"And suddenly Althena got in your way!" Bob surmised.

Max moaned. "That's when all the bad luck started! I don't know why she suddenly turned up, but I made a mistake in letting her escape. Then Michael decided to pursue her and get her out of the way for a few days. There was no other way—we were close to success and we didn't want any interference!"

"So that you could search for the gold figurines in peace?" Bob asked.

"Yes. Actually I was supposed to explore the island for suitable filming locations until Elvira had the stupid idea to send you guys instead and keep me in Los Angeles for other work."

"How did you actually catch Althena?" Jupiter asked 'Liotta'.

"When she took off in the bus... Max was there with the car and we followed the bus..." 'Liotta' replied.

Jupiter nodded. "That's when Pete had looked away for a brief moment."

'Liotta' added: "We caught your friend in Malibu."

"Then you took Althena to this island and then get in our way here," Jupe surmised. "I thought access here is restricted."

"Fishing and diving are allowed at certain sections of the island," 'Liotta' said. "You just have to know where."

"And what was your plan in case you found the treasure," asked Pete, who already suspected the answer.

"We would have gone to another country," 'Liotta' said. "Somewhere by the sea. Far away. Nothing holds us in Los Angeles any more. I have an absolutely stressful job. And Max only ever gets temporary contracts from companies for her archival work. That doesn't make her happy either."

"For the time being, there will be a temporary contract with the prison," Jupiter said dryly but in a bit milder tone. As bad as the two had played along, somehow he felt a little sorry for how they had turned into criminals in the end. The treasure was not a pot of gold, they belonged to a museum.

Jupiter had one more question that needed clearing up. "'Liotta', why did you set the fire at the wreck?"

"I had to prevent you from coming here to the waterfall," 'Liotta' admitted. "My mistake was probably taking away your mobile phones. If I hadn't, you shouldn't be suspicious right away."

Jupiter nodded. "After you have taken our mobile phones, you continued to make us nervous—either to make us fearful or give up."

'Liotta' nodded. "By the way, your mobile phones are in the pirate wreck—except for the one drenched in water, of course."

Pete smiled sourly.

'Liotta's' mobile rang and Bob answered. It was Inspector Cotta. He had organized a police helicopter and wanted to know their location on the island so that he could contact the military for permission to land.

Bob turned to Max and asked: "Is the helicopter you came in still there?"

"Yes," Max replied. "It is waiting for me."

"Where is it?" Bob continued.

"It is at the same place that you landed yesterday."

Bob gave the inspector the necessary information, including the pirate wreck where Althena was imprisoned by 'Liotta'.

"Let's go," said Jupiter. "We can get our stuff later. Also the police divers would have a lot to do to retrieve the figurines."

The small group started to move. Suddenly the two cats appeared and accompanied them for a while. Pete bent down and stroked them. When he straightened up again, the cats disappeared into the darkness.

"I would have loved to take them with me," muttered Pete.

Jupiter frowned. "They couldn't have it any better than on this island, could they?"

Pete was silent. He knew that Jupiter was unfortunately right again.

The police helicopter was about to land when the group entered the clearing.

The movie company's helicopter was there. The pilot, who was the same one that brought The Three Investigators to the island, had been waiting for Max all the time and was now watching the spectacle with interest.

"This seems to have been a bigger search for you," he greeted The Three Investigators. He assumed that Max wanted to search for the lost boys. He was all the more astonished that the inspector, who came down from the roaring aircraft, took the two adults to task and duly read them their rights before arresting them.

The pilot was asked to make his way home alone as the police helicopter offered enough space for everyone and also for one more person. When they had boarded, Jupiter directed the helicopter to the pirate wreck. They quickly found it in the helicopter's bright searchlight.

When the helicopter landed, their tent almost flew away due to the wind created by the rotor blades. The Three Investigators immediately jumped onto the beach and hurried to the wreck. They climbed over the rocks, and none of the boys paid any attention to the water. Pete was the first on the wreck, followed by Bob and Jupiter.

Outside the galley door, Pete pulled out his lock pick set. After unlocking the padlock, the door was still stuck. They had to kick it a few times until it was finally forced open. The Three Investigators stormed into the galley.

In the corner lay Althena with her hands and feet tied up. While Jupiter turned on the flashlight, Pete knelt down and cut the ropes. At the same time, Bob freed Althena from the tape on her mouth.

"It's about time," the detective said and rubbed her hands. "I had already doubted you!" She grinned as she did so.

"Boys always take a little longer," Jupiter said.

Pete added: "Althena! We have the criminals and the treasure!"

Althena straightened up. "Hey! Congratulations! Mrs Livingston will be very pleased! You've met the lady, haven't you?"

"Sure!" said Jupiter. "We'll visit her all together, won't we?"

Athena smiled and Jupiter continued: "And here is your camera, Althena! It has shown us the way to everything, as you hoped. Only the date... you should now set it back correctly."

"The date? Oh!"

Jupiter nodded. "This mistake has hidden the truth from us for a while. We thought you were in Max's office a day earlier. Max surprised you there, didn't she?"

Althena sat up. "Yes. I managed to flee, but then that guy came after me. I boarded a car at an intersection, made up a story, and the driver fortunately drove me to Rocky Beach so I wanted to ask you for help. I thought I escaped from the chaser but when I got off near the salvage yard, that chap jumped out of another car and began to chase me." Althena recalled.

With a few stretches, she loosened her body from its shackles. "By the way, have you found any sign of Dennis Browne?" she asked. "I have a hunch that he is still on the island."

"You're not wrong totally." Pete looked at her. "I met him... but only his skull. Browne probably drowned in the lake."

"He could not swim," Althena added.

Jupiter had to smile. "You've really informed yourself well!"

"Part of my job!" she said. "And where are the gold figurines?"

"At the bottom of the lake," Jupe replied. "The police must first recover it. But we'll tell you all about that later..."

Suddenly, Bob remembered something. "As a little foretaste, take a look at this!" He pulled out of his trouser pocket the figurine of the little elephant—the one that was found first. He had kept it all along instead of putting it with the others. Althena took the figurine and admired it closely. "You really are great detectives," she said appreciatively.

"The cats helped," Pete added.